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CHICO

THE STORY OF A HOMING PIGEON

BY·LUCY·M·BLANCHARD

$1.75

CHICO

The Story of a Homing Pigeon

By Lucy M. Blanchard

LE Andrea and his small sister Maria live
'enice near St. Mark's Square, which is,
l the world knows, the paradise of pigeons.
. is natural that the children's pet should
'hico, a homing pigeon.

ow Chico served at the front during the war,
how the message he carried back to Venice
ght reward from the government to his
:r, makes a delightful story for children.
h of this little book's charm is in the
:tian atmosphere and the glimpses of an-
: beauty and happy life.

Illustrated

Glenn Bothwell Martineau

March 14 - 1923.

There was no greater hero in the war than this faithful loving fingers

Lucy M. Blanchard

CHICO

THE STORY OF A HOMING PIGEON

This One
H647-NN6-2EZC

KATHERINE G HEALEY

CHICO

THE STORY OF A HOMING PIGEON

BY LUCY M. BLANCHARD

ILLUSTRATED BY KATHERINE G. HEALEY

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DEDICATED

TO ALL WHO LOVE VENICE

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CHAPTER I

OLD PAOLO

SOME years before the Great War, there lived in a little house on one of the side canals of Venice, an honest workman and his family. Giovanni Minetti, for such was his name, was employed in a certain glass factory in Murano, while, in all Venice, there was no one with fingers more deft in the making of beautiful lace than Luisa, his wife.

At the time of our story, Andrea, the elder child, was nearly eight, and his little sister, Maria, two years younger.

Consigning the children to the care of her uncle (old Paolo, the caretaker of St. Mark's), Luisa

would go each morning to the lace factory, returning just in time to prepare the simple dinner, at eventide.

Those were wonderful days for the children, for though they missed their father and mother, they were always happy with old Paolo.

"Buon giorno"[1] they would shout every morning when he stopped for them on his way to the famous church, and Maria, holding tight to one of the old man's hands, would trot along by his side, while Andrea, more independent, would run on ahead in his eagerness to thread the narrow streets and catch the first glimpse of the Piazza, as St. Mark's Square is called.

Then, while the old man cleaned and dusted, the children wandered about the dusky interior, touching the gold mosaic figures with awed fingers, or gazing reverently at the great altar front of silver gilt.

After a little, hand in hand, they would scamper out into the bright sunshine where they never tired of the many wonderful objects that make

[1] Good-morning.

St. Mark's Square a fairyland for young and old alike.

"'Roglo!" little Maria would cry, as she pointed upward to the great clock with its dial of blue and gold. It was the nearest she could come to pronouncing "orologio," the Italian word for clock. Then she would listen as hard as ever she could, hoping the bronze figures would strike the hour on the bell.

But Andrea loved best the horses that stood above the entrance of the church. In his little soul he almost worshiped the fiery steeds and loved to fancy himself seated on their backs. He even went so far as to plan to scale the wall in order to satisfy his ambition.

"Sometime, I will do it," he used to say, as he struck a determined attitude, and Maria would look at him with adoring eyes. How venturesome he was! He was taller than she by half a head, and his added two years gave him a place in dignity far above her.

It was no wonder the boy should be so crazy over the great bronze steeds when one remem-

bers that Venice is practically horseless and that they were almost the only ones he had ever seen.

Perchance, even as they talked, they would hear the flutter of wings, and some half-dozen pigeons, with soft coos, would light on their shoulders. Then Maria would laugh aloud with delight, and Andrea would forget his wild dreams as they stroked the glossy wings and admired the bright eyes, all the while feeding them dried peas or grain with which their mother never forgot to see their pockets were supplied.

If, by chance, they flung a handful on the ground, in a second there would be a whole flock of pigeons, lighting on the pavement.

Then Maria would clap her hands, and Andrea would have all he could do to see that no bird, greedier than the rest, got more than its share.

The children would be so absorbed that they would become quite unconscious of the tourists that would gather to watch the pretty group, for Venice was full of tourists in those days — people who came, even from far-off America, to see the wonderful St. Mark's Square, and hard-

hearted, indeed, was the man or woman who could turn away without buying at least one bag of grain from insistent vendors and join the children in feeding the pigeons.

But I have not yet begun to tell the wonders of St. Mark's Square. This was in June, 1910; the Campanile was being built to replace the old one that had fallen in 1902, and to little Maria and Andrea, there was a fascination in watching the workmen lift the great stones into place from the confused débris at its base.

If the Piazza was wonderful, so, too, was the piazzetta with the Ducal Palace with the golden staircase and the two columns, the one surmounted by the winged lion of St. Mark, the other by St. Theodore, standing on a crocodile.

Sometimes, after having wandered to the edge of the Grand Canal and looked away to the blue dome of the church of Maria della Salute, they would run back to the Square and, hand in hand, go window-wishing among the shops that line its sides. No one who has never seen these shops of Venice can form any conception of how fas-

cinating they are with their strands of glittering beads or yards upon yards of marvelous laces.

Often Andrea would exclaim, as they flattened their noses against the glass, "When I am a man, I will work in the glass factory as my father does, and, perhaps, who knows, I shall discover some new glaze which shall make all the world amazed?" He had never forgotten the day when his father had taken him to the factory and shown him the molten glaze and the workmen blowing the glass into marvelous shapes. That day he had decided upon his future career.

But little Maria cared more for the laces, and would shyly point to some especially beautiful piece and say softly:

"Perhaps, it was the madre who made that."

Once she followed an American woman into the shop and stood by her side watching her bargain for an exquisite collar. So intently she looked that the woman turned and met her gaze, remarking to her companion:

"Even the children have it in them — I mean

the love for beautiful things; and did you see her fingers? — any one could tell they were meant for lace-making."

Sometimes the children lingered so long in this way that the bronze figures would strike twelve, and they would have to hurry back so as not to keep old Paolo waiting for his noonday lunch.

Then, in some little recess around the corner of the church, with countless pigeons waiting for the crumbs, they would sit with him, sharing his frugal meal. When they had finished, he would sometimes take them for a ride in his shabby gondola on the Grand Canal, and on the way they would beg to stop for just a moment at the famous well with two porphyry lions. Andrea was tall enough to clamber by himself after the manner of young Venetians, and nothing would do but Paolo must lift Maria, so she, too, would proudly straddle one of the fierce figures. There they would sit while the old caretaker would count the pigeons bathing and splashing in the water.

But, better than anything else, the children

liked to snuggle close to their companion while he told them wonderful stories until it was time for him to go back to work.

While they watched with fascinated eyes, he would trace a diagram in the pavement to show how the Grand Canal, in its wanderings, exactly describes the letter "S." His eyes would glow as he told of the grandeur of Venice in the time of the Doges, or cause the children to shudder at gruesome accounts of how, in the olden time, the prisoners were thrown from the Bridge of Sighs, into the water below.

Perchance, he would tell of the wedding of the Adriatic and call Venice the Bride of the Sea, or give a vivid account of how the body of St. Mark was brought there in the long ago.

In fact, his tales were so realistic, that it almost seemed as if he must have been an eye-witness of every incident he narrated.

CHAPTER II

ANDREA'S WISH

Of all the old man's tales, there was not one the children liked so well as the story of St. Mark's pigeons.

It was strange that, as soon as he began to talk about them, there would be heard the whirr, whirr of wings, and in an instant, countless birds would light on every possible ledge, nestling among the statuary and filling the air with the soft music of their coos.

On this special day of which I am going to tell you, three of the very prettiest flew straight into Maria's lap and settled there, to her delight, with an air of proprietorship, while one particularly striking fellow perched inquisitively on Andrea's shoulder.

"See, Paolo," the boy cried, "is n't he — GREAT?" This was a new word that he had caught from one of the American tourists and he was immensely proud of having mastered its

pronunciation. As he spoke, he pointed to the fine glossy wings and the bill that arched so delicately at the point.

"See," he cried again, calling attention to the iridescent colors, shining green and purple in the sunshine, then sighed disconsolately. "I do wish he belonged to me." And he stroked lovingly the feathered head. "I never have had a pet of any kind."

"Is it, then, a matter of such grief?" questioned the old caretaker, surprised at the lad's desire.

"Si,"[1] he answered passionately, "I wish — oh, how I wish that I might have one for my very own!" — and he held the captive pigeon close against his cheek. "Do you understand?"

Paolo's answer came slowly. He had not forgotten an incident in his own boyhood when he had made a pet of a certain fledgling. It had been injured in some way and would have died had it not been for the careful nursing his rescuer bestowed. His eyes grew misty and, somewhat

[1] Yes.

angrily, he hastily drew his coarse sleeve over them that the children might not perceive his weakness. It had been foolish enough to have grieved, as a child, because a pet pigeon had been shot by some heartless fellow for a pot-pie, but, after a lapse of over sixty years — He cleared his throat, then patted Andrea's dark hair.

"There is no reason why you should not have your wish. Patience! and the next fledgling that falls from the nest shall be yours."

"Grazie!" the boy cried joyfully; "mil grazie!"[1] And in a paroxysm of delight, he seized one of his good friend's hands.

Laughing, Paolo turned to Maria who had sat quietly all the while, fondling the feathered creatures in her lap.

"How about you, little one? Would you, too, like a pigeon of your own?"

"No," she answered shyly, "I love them *all* too much." And the soft coo, coo-oo-oo from the lapful of birds seemed appreciative of her words.

"Very well, my dear, it shall be as you wish,

[1] Thanks! A thousand thanks!

and now that I have it all straight in my old head, what pleases each of you best, what say you, shall I begin the story?"

"Si! Si!" they cried in unison, settling back against the wall, anxious not to lose a single syllable.

"It was in the time of the Doge, Enrico Dandolo," he began, bending a questioning look at his eager listeners; "of course, you know that in the long ago, Venice was ruled by men who bore the title of Doge?"

The children nodded assent, and he went on, impressively:

"Dandolo was a great man. He was eighty years old at the time he came into the office, and blind, as well, but he was not too old to undertake mighty enterprises."

"When was it he lived?" asked Andrea meditatively.

"Oh, many, many years ago — I am inclined to think it must have been at least five or six hundred."

"Five or six hundred years ago!" repeated

Andrea incredulously, his childish mind refusing to compass so great a lapse of time.

"Well — thereabouts," Paolo resumed, somewhat disturbed at the interruption; "it was in the time of the crusades. Have you ever heard of the crusades, my dear?" And he softly touched Maria's chin. Before she could reply, her brother put in, proudly, "I know, they were wars to rescue the holy lands from the —" he paused.

"Infidels," supplied Paolo approvingly. "That 's right." And any one seeing the old man would surely have thought that he had himself fought against the infidels, such fire shot from his eyes, and so tense became his muscles. "It was in the Fourth Crusade that Venice played so mighty a part."

"Was Dandolo the leader?" asked Andrea, sitting bolt upright in his excitement, and forgetting the pigeon which, loosed by the sudden movement, escaped, and soared, with a quick spiral curve, to the blue sky.

Regretfully, the child watched the flight, but settled back as Paolo went on:

"Old though he was, he was the hero of the whole expedition. Even the French had no general to compare with him. And tell me, both of you, did you ever see a picture of a Doge of Venice?"

"I have!" Maria cried; "and he wore a coat all red and gold and a cap —"

"Si! si!" the old man interrupted, almost beside himself with excitement; "those were his robes of state, but in armor, and on horseback before the walls of Constantinople! Ah, then he must have been magnifico!"

"On horseback, did you say?" repeated Andrea, and his eyes wandered to the bronze steeds the manes of which glistened in the sunlight.

Paolo nodded. "And I have no doubt but that the one great Dandolo rode was like those very horses; and, by the way, my lad, did you ever hear that they were part of the spoils he brought from the East in triumph and placed above our own St. Mark's?"

Without allowing Andrea time to comment on the amazing fact, he went on, still more excitedly:

"It is said that Dandolo, great as he was, would not have been able to take the city had it not been for a messenger pigeon that brought him most important information. Nor is that all the part the brave birds played at this great time, for it was no other than some of our own fine homers that conveyed the first news of glorious victory to Venice. Hence it was, that when the Doge returned, in triumph, he issued a proclamation that the pigeons should evermore be held in reverence."

Paolo paused, well-nigh exhausted by his enthusiasm, and, reaching over, laid his withered hand on the birds that still cooed contentedly in Maria's lap.

"It's no wonder they're so tame when every one has been loving them for the last five or six hundred years!" she murmured.

"Paolo!" Andrea suddenly asked, with sparkling eyes, "do you suppose that we can teach my pigeon to carry messages?"

"I should n't be surprised," replied the old caretaker, entering into the lad's enthusiasm;

"they're as intelligent now as they ever were. All they need is the training. It's funny how their little heads can hold so much."

Reaching over, he took one of the birds from Maria's lap and pointed to the bulge just above the tiny ear:

"Some people say that's where their sense of direction is located, but you can't convince me it is n't in their hearts. It's the love they have for their homes that makes 'em fly from any distance straight to their nesting-places. I've noticed that a good homing pigeon has bright eyes, and a stout heart, not to mention a keen sense of direction, and strong wings to carry him long distances, but more than all else, there must be the love of home."

Andrea had lost not a syllable of what the old man said. For a long time he had secretly cherished the desire to own one of the pretty fluttering creatures, but not, until now, had the possibility occurred to him that he might teach one to carry messages.

Long after Paolo had returned to his duties in

the church, the boy sat watching the clouds of pigeons circling above, or flying double (bird and shadow), against the walls of the church.

He had made up his mind that as soon as Paolo fulfilled his promise, he would begin to train his fledgling.

"There's no knowing," he cried eagerly to Maria, "what important messages my bird will carry!"

In reply she only smiled — it was enough for her that the pigeons loved to have her stroke them as they nestled in her lap.

CHAPTER III

MARIA'S BIRTHDAY

ANDREA was so possessed with his idea that he ran every step of the way home that afternoon, climbed up the narrow dark stairs, two steps at a time, and burst upon his mother in such excitement that she feared some misfortune had befallen the children.

"What is it?" she cried, looking up from the stiff porridge she was mixing, "are you hurt? — and Maria — where is she?"

"Nothing has happened," was the breathless answer; "that is, nothing dreadful, and Maria is behind with Paolo. It is only — " his dark cheeks flushed. "It is only that he has promised me a pigeon of my own!"

"Is that all?" Greatly relieved, his mother turned again to the polenta.[1] What a child he was, to be sure, to be so pleased at the idea of the possession of a pigeon!

[1] Cake, or thick porridge made of maize.

"But, madre," he protested, "I am going to train it to carry messages. There's no knowing what *my* pigeon will do!"

"Si! Si!" She replied absently as she turned to see if the charcoal was right for the baking.

It was a mean little house, at least so it would seem to most American children — just three rooms overlooking one of the side canals, and over a fish shop. It was built of brick (no one knew, how long ago), and was wedged in between others, of exactly the same type.

But it was home, and whatever else it lacked, it had a front window, with shutters, and a balcony with an iron railing, and when tucked up in their beds at night, in the tiny dark alcove, the children could hear the soft swish of the water against the embankment.

In spite of the window, even the best room was never very light, and only an occasional streak of sunshine found its way in, but on those rare occasions it fell upon the choicest treasure of the home, a rude colored print of the Virgin, in a modest shrine, hung with gilded fringe. On the

shelf above, Luisa took care to see that a lamp was ever burning, and on the table before it stood always a tiny vase of fresh flowers. What matter, that the carpet was old, and the furniture worn, the Virgin's shrine was there!

Unconsciously, the children trod gently in this room, and their laughter was subdued, but in the kitchen — ah, there, their spirits were unrestrained.

Maria was not long behind her brother, but the scampi,[1] were already frying in the pan, before Giovanni, in his working shirt, appeared in the doorway, hungry and ready for his dinner.

"Padre! Padre!" cried Andrea; "only guess — the pet I am to have!" Then, with scarcely an instant's pause, he went on, in a shrill voice, "A pigeon, padre, is n't that — GREAT?"

"Well, well!" Giovanni answered, taking his seat at the head of the table, "and so you are to have a pigeon for a pet. I might have guessed anything else — a parrot, a little singing bird, or perhaps, a couple of grilli[2] in a tiny cage, but

[1] Fish. [2] Crickets.

a pigeon! Why, you play with them all day long on St. Mark's Square."

"But that is not like having one of one's own," the boy protested.

He made a gesture of disgust. "A parrot, a singing bird, a couple of grilli! What was his father thinking of?" and in another moment he was explaining how he would train his bird to be a carrier pigeon, and how bright its eyes would be, and how strong its wings, until his father laughed and declared himself convinced that it would be the most wonderful thing in all the world to own a pigeon.

The fish had quite disappeared from the platter when Giovanni again spoke:

"To-morrow is the Sabbath, and it is the little Maria's birthday — what say you?" — he addressed himself particularly to Luisa — "shall we go to the Lido?"

To the Lido! The children's eyes sparkled. There was nothing they loved more to do than to play on the sand at the Lido.

"Si!" Luisa answered with ready acquies-

cence; "and on the way let us spend a little time at the Accademia — it has been long since I have seen the pictures of the great Titian and even Maria is quite old enough."

So it was settled, and the children talked of nothing else the rest of the evening, dropping off to sleep without once giving a thought to the lapping of the water.

When they woke, it was late; their mother had been up for a long time, getting everything ready for the day's excursion. Already the lunch-basket was packed, and as soon as the children were dressed and the breakfast eaten, it was time to start.

At first, Andrea walked with his mother, insisting upon carrying the basket, but after a little his arms became weary and, without expostulation, he allowed his father to take it from him, while he ran joyfully ahead, eager to catch a glimpse of the bronze horses, and dabble his fingers a few moments in the well with the bathing pigeons.

As for Maria, she was most conscious of the

fact that she was six years old, and with shining eyes walked carefully by her mother's side. She wore a string of gay beads about her neck (a birthday gift from her father) and red tassels dangled bewitchingly from the tops of her new shoes.

It was only a ten-minutes walk from St. Mark's to the Accademia, and after a number of turns through one narrow calle after another, they came to the bridge that led directly to the entrance.

Maria was awed at the imposing doorway, but Andrea, boylike, marched in unabashed, and, after a cursory glance in various directions, declared himself ready to leave. He would far rather be outdoors and could scarcely wait to get on to the Lido.

"Not so soon, my lad, there is much that you should see." And, taking him by the hand, Giovanni led him into a great room with two immense pictures. One was the Assumption of the Virgin by the great Titian and before it even restless Andrea was stilled, feeling a little of the spell

that has made of this place a world shrine for all lovers of art — the wonderful figure of the Virgin, in billowy robes, rising to heaven, while countless angels, each one seeming more adorable than the other, seem to bear her up in her glad flight.

"Listen," Luisa whispered, "do you not hear them singing 'Halleleujah'?"

There were other pictures in the same room, and one especially that interested Andrea. It was Tintoretto's Miracle of St. Mark, and he listened attentively as his father told the story:

How a certain pious slave, forbidden to visit and venerate the house of St. Mark, disobeyed the command and went, notwithstanding. His master, angered, ordered that the poor fellow's eyes be put out. But lo, a miracle stayed the hands of those who were sent to carry out the cruel sentence. The slave was freed, and his master converted.

Then Luisa led Maria into another room, saying:

"Here is the picture I most wanted you to see,

for you are named for the blessed Virgin. Have you not heard how, when Mary was scarcely more than a child, she was taken to the temple and consecrated to the service of the church?"

Maria shook her head; her childish heart was full; and with solemn eyes she looked long and earnestly at the little girl, with tightly braided hair, slowly mounting the long flight of steps to the high priest who, though he seemed stern and austere, held out his hand in kindly greeting.

Long Maria lingered, noticing every detail, the blue dress, the lighted taper, the halo round the head, and she was loath to leave, even when her father came to the door, and her mother said gently:

"Come, we must be off, if we would be at the Lido for our lunch."

Soon they were in the steamer which chugged so merrily that Andrea forgot all about the pictures he had seen in his interest in watching the wheels go around and the white foam in the vessel's wake, but Maria sat in a kind of dream until they reached the landing.

Then, in the hurry that ensued and the many distractions on the shore, the picture of the brave little girl, for the time, faded from her mind, and she, too, gave herself up with undisguised pleasure to the fascinations of the Lido.

It is a strip of shore extending along the mouth of the Lagoon and forming a bulwark of Venice against the Adriatic. It was here that the wedding ceremony was performed in the long ago, and the view is most beautiful from this point.

They sat on a bench in front of the Aquarium to eat their luncheon, and the children could scarcely wait to finish, they were so eager to press their noses against the glass and watch the funny creatures swimming in the tanks. Maria clapped her hands and declared the best of all were the sea-horses — "Cavalli marini," she called them.

Then, what a glorious afternoon they had on the smooth beach, hunting for shells and digging in the sand. How Andrea laughed when his father took him away out and let the breakers roll over him. Then Maria, holding tight to her

brother's hand, who still seemed much bigger and stronger, even if this was her birthday, ventured far into the waves.

Much too quickly the happy hours sped, and before they knew it it was six o'clock.

All the way home on the steamer Andrea held tightly to the dried starfish he had found on the sand, while Maria was the happiest child in Venice, with a brooch made from the pearl shell of the Lido, which Luisa called "fior di mare," or flower of the sea.

As they stumbled sleepily across the Square in the darkening twilight, holding fast to the hands of their mother and father, their ears failed to catch the faint cheep of a baby bird in distress, and they reached home entirely unaware of the tragedy that had happened in pigeon-land.

CHAPTER IV

CHICO

WHEN Paolo called for the children Monday morning, there was an air of mystery about him that was distinctly puzzling. Then, too, he walked unusually fast, so that Andrea found it difficult to keep up with him, and finally demanded curiously, "What's the matter?" without, however, receiving any answer.

"What's the matter?" echoed Maria, falling behind after a futile effort to keep up, and Paolo slackened his pace with a laconic "Wait and see," that was even more mystifying.

On reaching the Piazza, his manner showed still greater excitement.

"Venite!" [1] he exclaimed, leading the way to a small shed back of the church where he was accustomed to keep his tools.

"Venite!" he repeated, entering by a rear door into the gloomy interior.

[1] Come here.

It was several moments before the eyes of the children became sufficiently accustomed to the dim light to really see what was being pointed out. High above their heads was a small window, close to which had been placed a wooden box.

The old man stopped a moment, listened, reached up his hand, then drew it back with an air of satisfaction, while the youngsters, fascinated, watched without in the least surmising what it was all about.

With a finger on his lips to enjoin silence, he suddenly seized Andrea and raised him to the level of the window ledge.

"There!" he cried, "don't be afraid. Put your hand into the box."

As the boy timidly obeyed, he went on, "Now tell me, what do you feel? Speak!"

The frightened look on Andrea's face gave way, first to one of mystification, then to an expression of joy as his hand touched something warm:

"L' uccello!"[1] he cried; then, in an ecstasy of delight, "Is it mine?"

[1] The bird.

Paolo nodded, and, after putting the boy down on the floor, gently lifted Maria so that she, too, might put her fingers into the nest he had made for the fledgling he had found on the pavement the evening before.

"It's a baby pigeon," she softly murmured.

"Si! Si!" the old caretaker declared, delighted at the sensation he had caused. "I came across him all huddled up by yonder column."

"And may I really have him?" queried Andrea, finding it hard to realize that he had gained his heart's desire.

"Why not? I doubt if the old birds will even notice he has gone. You know when the mother has other eggs to take her attention, she gives the fledglings into the care of the father bird, and it is n't very long before he pushes them out to shift for themselves. There is no reason why this particular one should not belong to you: in fact, I imagine he's a bit lonesome in this strange place, though, to be sure, I did all I could to make him comfortable, with a wisp of hay and a few dried sticks, but, at best, I'm not much of a

nest-maker. Come now, would you like to have a look at him?"

"Si! Si!" the children cried together. And with that Paolo, after lighting a bit of discarded candle and giving it to Andrea to hold, stretched up and took the pigeon from the nest.

In the flickering light the children bent lovingly over the little fluttering thing in the old man's hand; they had never before seen a young bird at such close range and they looked with wonder at the soft, shapeless body, the big eyes, the ugly bill, wide open in insistent demand for food.

"May I give him a crumb to eat?" asked Andrea in an odd tone.

"Si," was the ready assent; "I expect he's hungry enough, with no one to wait on him. By the way, did you ever see a baby pigeon fed?"

The children shook their heads and listened most eagerly as the old man went on:

"This is a matter in which both father and mother take a hand, and the first food is a liquid

secreted in their crops and called 'pigeons' milk.' When mealtime comes, the parents open wide their beaks, the little birds thrust in their bills, and the fun begins. I tell you it takes a great deal of effort and bobbing of heads for Baby Pigeon to get a satisfactory meal."

"How can we — ever — feed him?" Andrea anxiously interrupted, as if he felt that his charge might prove somewhat of a responsibility.

"Don't worry," was the comforting response as Paolo nodded his wise old head; "he may not be able to shift for himself, but I am willing to wager he will manage to eat whatever you offer him. You see this particular kind of infant food only lasts a few days; after that the milk gradually thickens and becomes mixed with bits of grain. Almost before he knows it, Baby Pigeon is independent of his parents and eats quite as if fully grown."

With that the old caretaker held out a piece of cracked wheat to the fledgling who devoured it greedily and opened his beak for more.

The children laughed aloud and clapped their

hands in glee, continuing to feed him until Paolo declared the bird had had a royal breakfast and carefully replaced him in the nest.

Then, with Andrea on one side and Maria holding tightly to the other hand, he led them out of the shed and into the bright sunshine.

They stopped for a moment under the window for a lingering glance upward while Paolo called their attention to the dry-goods box he had placed on end for their special convenience.

"By standing on this," he explained, "you can get on a level with the nest without being dependent on me."

All the morning the children hung around the shed, delighted when there was an occasional sound from the nest above, and from time to time they clambered up to whisper soft nothings to the sharp ears of Baby Pigeon.

At noon, when eating their luncheon, they plied the old caretaker with questions some of which, it must be confessed, taxed all his ingenuity to answer satisfactorily.

"How long will it be before I can begin to

train him?" interrupted Andrea, on fire with his desire at once to realize his ambition.

Paolo laughed. "One question at a time. I notice some soft down already beginning to show, so I fancy it will not be many weeks until he can boast as much in the way of fine clothes as his own father and mother. As for his training, it 's quite too soon to think of that; so, my boy, you will have to possess your soul in patience for a while longer. By the way, your bird should have a name. Have you any in mind?"

"Not yet, although I've been thinking hard about that very thing," Andrea answered meditatively; "no name seems good enough."

"I think 'bambino' would be nice," suggested Maria; "he's such a darling baby."

"Si, but he will soon be grown up," put in Andrea; "I was wondering how Marco would do."

"Well, I don't say it would n't do," Paolo answered reflectively; "but it seems to me something like 'caro' or 'amato'[1] might be appropriate for such a pet."

[1] Dear — beloved.

Andrea shook his head. And, after again racking his brain in an effort to suggest a really appropriate name, the old man finally slapped his hand on his side:

"It just comes to me this instant, something I heard one of those touristas call a little curly dog by. At the time it occurred to me that it sounded more like a name for a pigeon."

"What was it?" Andrea inquired eagerly.

"Chico," Paolo answered, lingering on the first syllable, exactly as the tourista had done — "Chee-ko."

Andrea was charmed, agreeing that there was something about it that seemed to suit a saucy pigeon, and, vastly pleased, he repeated over and over, "Chico, Chico," while Maria echoed softly "Chee-ko."

CHAPTER V

THE MEANEST CAT IN VENICE

It is hard to imagine a more forlorn experience in the life of a young bird than to be suddenly pushed from the nest and find himself alone on a hard pavement. It is bad enough when it happens as the result of premeditation on the part of an unfeeling parent who has made up his mind that his offspring are quite able to shift for themselves, but, when it occurs from accident, it is nothing short of tragic.

Poor Chico, this was what had happened to him, and he had huddled, shivering, close to the column of St. Theodore and tried in vain to reason everything out in his pigeon mind. Many things had happened of late that he had not been able to understand. His mother, hitherto most attentive to his sister and himself, had suddenly ceased feeding them with the nice soft food they loved so well, at the same time refusing to cuddle them under her warm breast.

He remembered vaguely hearing her impatiently coo to his father, that *he* would have to look out for the fledglings, her duty was to the eggs. At the time he had n't understood what she meant by eggs, although once or twice he had caught a glimpse of two white oval things under her breast which she seemed to be dreadfully proud of.

It would n't have been so bad if his father had been as affectionate as usual, but, on the contrary, he had treated his sister and himself as if they were in the way, and it was easy to see Father Pigeon would have greatly preferred crowding on the nest with his mate to getting food for two greedy fledglings.

In fact, that was how the accident had happened. Chico had been so unfortunate as to get in the way, with the result that he had been pushed out and had fallen to the ground.

Poor little naked fledgling, he had shivered and huddled close to the friendly column, for, even in summer, the breeze from the Adriatic often blows fresh and cool.

He had just begun to wonder how he should get anything to eat, when suddenly a shadow had come over him, causing him to crouch low in even greater terror, while his heart thumped horribly, but before he could utter a sound he had been seized by a big warm hand, and a voice that was not unkindly had exclaimed:

"Did the little pigeon fall from the nest?"

In the warm comfort of Paolo's hand the bird had forgotten his fear, and his little heart had ceased to thump as he reflected this must be a human, and his mother had always taught him that "humans" were kind to birds in St. Mark's Square. So, with a feeling akin to confidence, he had allowed himself to be carried somewhere he did not know, and deposited in what he supposed was meant for a nest, although it was not one bit like the nice, soft one to which he had been accustomed.

He had even managed to eat a crumb or two, and, in spite of the fact that he was very lonely without his sister to keep him company, he had finally succeeded in going to sleep.

In the morning the big hand had grasped him again and had shown him to two long-legged creatures who he had guessed were human children, because they looked much as his mother had described them in one of her favorite lullaby coos. He had not been afraid of them, but, flattered by their delighted exclamations, had eaten everything they had offered him.

By the time the second night had come, Chico had so far become accustomed to his strange surroundings that he slept almost as well as if he had been under his mother's wings.

He was still dreaming when he heard a voice call, "Chico, Chico — are you still there, Chico?"

He roused instantly, reminded of his friends who had given him his breakfast the morning before.

He raised his head. There was a sound of other little feet climbing upon the dry-goods box, and a softer voice called, "Chico, Chico!"

Still he made no movement, listening while the children speculated as to whether or not their pet had been spirited away during the night.

"Chico! Chico!" There was something so pleading in the boy's voice that the baby pigeon thrust his open bill out of the window on the ledge.

"He's here, he's here!" Andrea shouted, almost losing his balance in his excitement, but he saved himself in time to put a bit of cracked wheat into the wide-open mouth. It was greedily swallowed and the open bill demanded more. This performance was repeated until the boy's supply was exhausted. Then the bill was withdrawn, and Chico disappeared from view. But between the boy and the bird had been established a bond that would never be broken. From that time on, Chico was his pigeon in every sense of the word, and, at Andrea's first call, the greedy bill would immediately appear.

So it went on, until one bright morning, when the children turned the corner of the church, they found Chico, perched on the window ledge, taking a sun-bath and waiting for his friends.

My! what excitement there was! Andrea could scarcely wait to climb up on the box, and was de-

lighted when Chico cocked his head on one side and actually permitted his caresses.

"Bambino!" murmured Maria; "dear little baby bird. Oh, see! he's actually getting feathers!"

It was true, the soft down with which he was covered in some places was beginning to give way to the first pin feathers, his bill did not seem so awkwardly large, and the soft, shapeless body already showed signs of developing future grace.

After this Chico was always waiting for the children, and would cock his head on one side when he saw them coming, uttering little squeaky noises that did not sound in the least like cooing. All the time his feathers were growing and his wings becoming stronger.

Then came a day when Paolo declared that Chico must have his first lesson in flying, and the children watched, with abated breath, as the old man took the bird from his nest and placed him on the pavement, at the same time stationing himself at a little distance and holding an enticing morsel. At first the baby pigeon flopped

aimlessly about when, suddenly, Maria caught Andrea's arm, whispering excitedly, "He's going to do it, oh, he's going to do it!" and, miracle of miracles! after awkwardly raising one wing and then another, he actually mastered the first lesson and, in consequence, was treated to a royal breakfast. It was a great exertion, and, after satisfying his hunger, he then and there closed his weary eyes and took a nap on the pavement, much to Paolo's amusement.

"Well," he exclaimed, "it's the first time I ever taught a bird to fly. One never knows what one can do until one tries."

After that not a day passed that Chico did not make short flights, to Andrea from Maria, and from her to the old man's shoulder, until, one morning, he greatly amazed them by flying into his own window box.

Gaining confidence, Chico must have had it in his pigeon mind one morning to fly from his nest and greet his friends upon the pavement. But alas, he miscalculated his strength, even as human beings often do, and while he spread his

wings most boldly, he lost his balance and fell ignominiously to the ground. That would not of itself have been so bad, for, like children learning to walk, baby pigeons must have many a disaster before the art of flying is completely mastered, but, by some strange chance, it happened that a lean tortoise-shell kitten was prowling about one of the side streets and at that moment poked her head into St. Mark's Square. Now, in Venice, there are very few cats — in fact, because of the esteem in which pigeons are held, they are not popular pets. More than that, they are positively prohibited from St. Mark's Square, as any well-trained feline should know.

Where this cat came from, and to whom she belonged, ever remained a mystery, but as she curiously poked her head into the forbidden precinct she caught sight of Chico, lying stunned and helpless from his fall. Here was her chance. Straightway flinging caution to the winds, with a quick spring she landed full upon the trembling bird, at the same time seizing him with her paws and burying her cruel teeth in his tender flesh.

What would have been the result I shudder to reflect, had not Andrea at that moment appeared upon the scene. With a scream of terror he rushed forward, clapping his hands and making such an outcry that the kitten, frightened, dropped her prey and disappeared down the side street from which she had ventured.

When Paolo arrived on the scene a few moments later he found Andrea, well-nigh distracted, hugging his wounded pet to his breast, and whispering over and over again:

"Chico, Chico, you must n't die — you must n't die!"

It took Paolo but a few moments to assure himself that Chico was not seriously hurt, although he bore the scar made by the cruel claws for many a day, and it was weeks before he dared again to try the flight from his nest to the pavement.

As for the cat, although the old caretaker sallied forth vowing vengeance, she was never again seen.

Soon it was time for the children to go to

school in the old building situated some distance from St. Mark's, not far from the Rialto.

There was now only time in the morning for a brief visit with Chico before lessons began, and a hurried half-hour with him at luncheon. Hence the moments after four o'clock and the full holiday on Saturday were most precious, and on those occasions no one was happier than Chico, flying from one to another, and usually ending by perching coquettishly on Andrea's shoulder.

"There is n't a pigeon in Venice to compare with him," remarked Andrea, lovingly touching the daintily arched bill, and looking into the clear eyes. "Tell me, Paolo, did you ever see so fine a bird?"

In answer the old man thoughtfully stretched out the well-shaped wings, saying, as the colors shone iridescent green and blue in the sunshine: "They're as beautiful as any wings I ever saw, and better than that, they're strong. Wings like that can carry a pigeon any distance. Yes," he continued, more to himself than to the children,

"if he's to be a homer, it seems to me it's full time to begin his training."

Andrea started in an ecstasy of delight.

"Do you mean it, Paolo? Do you really mean it?"

The old man nodded. "Yes, and if you have no objections, we'll give him the first lesson next Saturday morning."

As if surmising that he was the subject of discussion, Chico flew back to Andrea's shoulder, where he coo-ooed blissfully, while Paolo unfolded to his eager listeners the details as he had planned them.

CHAPTER VI

TRAINING

As a first step he had secured a wicker basket with a close-fitting cover which roused the liveliest curiosity and caused Andrea to ask, doubtfully:

"What has a basket to do with teaching a pigeon?"

"Just about everything," the old man wisely replied. "By carrying the bird in a dark basket to the place from which he is to make his flight, he will have no way of acquainting himself with the direction in which he traveled, and, when released, must depend entirely upon his homing instinct."

"Chico won't like being shut up in a dark prison," interrupted Maria, stretching up to caress the glossy neck; "it's like being blindfolded."

"Perhaps not," was the rejoinder, "but if he is going to be trained to be a faithful homer, he will have to spend a good deal of time in the same

dark prison. It's part of the discipline of his life." As he finished, he began tracing figures on the pavement, and the children, wondering still more, watched him, fascinated.

"There's no doubt," he mused, more to himself than to his listeners, "but that he could find his way from such near-by points as the Ducal Palace and the Bridge of Sighs — I'm disposed to take him farther away for his first trial — say to the Rialto."

"Bene! bene!" [1] shouted Andrea, clapping his hands.

"Then," continued the old man, without paying any attention to the interruption, "if he does well from such distances as that, we'll gradually take him farther away — perhaps to the Lido and —"

"To the Lido," repeated Andrea, to whom this seemed a great distance. "Do you think he could find his way from there?"

"Without the least difficulty," was the answer, "and within a few weeks, unless I miss my

[1] Good! good!

guess; after a while we'll have to arrange to try him from other parts of Italy — Milan, for instance."

"Milan! Other parts of Italy!" The children found it hard to fancy cooing little Chico finding his way home from distant cities, and in spite of himself, Andrea's eyes filled with tears, as he faltered, "I — would n't — want — him to get — lost!"

"Not much danger of that, I fancy. If he does n't fall down on the easy flights, he'll be able to take the longer ones.

"Why, lad," Paolo went on kindly, touched by the boy's dejection, "if you want Chico to be a real homing pigeon, you must expect him to run some risks. Don't you remember Dandolo's bird that carried the glad news from Constantinople?"

Andrea nodded, doubtfully. While he had thought much of the possible glory Chico might gain as a faithful messenger, for the first time he trembled lest, in realizing the ambition, the safety of the bird might be endangered. Thoughts of

possible perils filled his mind with foreboding, but he did n't wish Paolo to think he was turning the white feather, so he swallowed hard and forced himself to say:

"I guess it will be all right."

"All right! I should say it would be," was the hearty response; "and just remember, my boy, if you expect your bird to have a stout heart you must keep up your own courage."

At last Saturday came, the day Paolo had set for the training to begin. Andrea was so excited he had no appetite for breakfast and would have rushed from the house without a mouthful if Luisa had not insisted that he eat at least one piece of the hot polenta. But that was all — he almost bolted it whole, and, without waiting for Paolo, was out of the house and in St. Mark's Square at least half an hour earlier than ever before.

Not that it was much satisfaction, for hard-hearted Paolo had carefully placed the pigeon in the basket the night before, saying as he secured the cover:

"He must not be allowed his freedom until we reach the Rialto, then he will be hungry and doubly anxious to reach home."

"Can't we give him anything to eat?" Andrea asked anxiously.

"Not a morsel!" was the stern reply. "If he is to be trained at all, it must be done right. Come, children, give me your promise not to interfere."

"We won't," they answered in unison, and though Andrea still thought the treatment very harsh, he dared not again raise his voice in further protest.

It seemed very forlorn not to find Chico waiting on his window ledge when he turned the corner of the church, and with heart aching for the imprisoned bird, he entered the dark little shed and looked anxiously for the basket. There it was, in the corner where Paolo had left it, but, as he called once, and then again, there was no answering "coo."

Andrea's heart sank; perhaps the bird was sick. Beset by anxious thoughts he crossed the room, took the basket in his hand and held it to

his ear. Not a sound! Genuinely frightened, he regretted bitterly that he had ever wished the bird trained. Why had he not been content with him as he was — the most beautiful bird in St. Mark's Square?

Turning the basket about, he looked it all over carefully. There was a slight stir. He breathed a sigh of relief, then joyfully caught his breath as he suddenly discovered two bright eyes looking straight at him through one of the cracks.

"Chico!" he cried joyfully; "Chico! Are you all right?" Placing his ear to the wicker prison, he caught a faint answering "coo," and a minute later the very tip of the bird's bill found its way through one of the cracks. It was heartrending, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that Andrea restrained himself from tearing off the cover of the basket and feeding his hungry pet, but he had given his promise, so he was obliged to content himself with holding the basket close to his cheek and murmuring soft words into the responsive ears of the prisoner.

So Paolo found him. Andrea started guiltily

as the old caretaker stepped in the door, but drew himself up proudly at the sharp inquiry:

"Is it possible that you are feeding Chico?"

"No," was the quick reply, "I am only talking to him. Surely there is n't any harm in that!"

"No harm at all," the old man answered; "and now I propose to take him to the Rialto and there give him his freedom, while you wait here and see if he knows enough to come home. Notice the time by the big clock; if he returns promptly, you may reward him with a good breakfast and plenty of water to drink, for he will be thirsty."

Andrea's face lighted up with joy. He had a pocket full of choice morsels, and, with a happy face, watched Paolo set out, carefully holding the basket with its precious load, while he and Maria settled themselves to await developments.

The Rialto is one of the busiest spots in all Venice; especially is it so at this time in the morning, for hither come the black boats from the island laden with fruits and vegetables to provision the city. On every side, amid the jostling throngs of people, one sees mountains of water-

melons, piles of garlic, old scows and worn-out gondolas, heaped with all manner of strange-looking fish. Crossing over the bridge to the end where the jewelers have their shops, and elbowing through the crowd of young girls and matrons, with their gay-colored handkerchiefs and strands of bright beads, Paolo came to a more secluded quarter. Here he stopped, and, with careful deliberation, lifted the cover of the basket, saying as he laid his hand affectionately on Chico's glossy head, "Now fly, my bird, straight to your house!"

Without a moment's delay Chico was out of his prison and with a quick spiral curve had soared into the blue Venetian sky. Pausing for an imperceptible instant, as though in search of some familiar object, he was off in the direction of St. Mark's Square.

In the meantime Andrea and Maria waited impatiently enough. They knew it would take time for Paolo to reach his destination, for the old man's steps were not as quick as they had once been. And then the awful thought would

come that Chico might not fly straight home — might be beguiled elsewhere for some reason.

Full well Andrea knew how much depended upon this first flight.

Just as the figures on the great clock struck the hour of ten there was a whirr of wings. An arrow of silver shot through the air, and in another instant Chico was in his nest.

"Urra! Urra!" the boy shouted, throwing his cap into the air; then boisterously seizing his pet, "You did it, you did it! Chico, old bird! My, but I'm proud of you!" Then remembering that Paolo had said there would be a message concealed about the bird's leg, his hand felt for the closely wound bit of tissue paper, and tense with excitement he shouted aloud Chico's first message:

"Evviva Italia!"[1]

Again he hugged his pet until he suddenly discovered a hungry bill in his pocket, and he remembered that Chico had n't had his breakfast.

When Paolo arrived upon the scene, puffing from his unaccustomed exertion, he found Chico

[1] Long live Italy!

greedily eating while Maria was still repeating, "Viva Italia!"

Upon comparing his watch with the clock Paolo's delight knew no bounds at finding that Chico had made the flight in one minute and a half, fully one half a minute shorter time than Paolo had allowed.

"Bene! bene!" he cried excitedly. "I told you he had the points of a good homing pigeon. All he needs is training." Then, laying his hand on Andrea's shoulder, he added, "My boy, you have a bird of which you may well be proud."

While he was thus under discussion Chico, seemingly unconscious that he had done anything at all remarkable, with his crop fairly bulging with the good things which he had eaten, perched serenely on the window ledge diligently preening his feathers.

This was but the first of many flights: the next time it was Paolo who stayed to watch the nest while Andrea set off, carrying the bird in his basket. He was especially delighted because the Colleoni statue was his destination, for there was no

place in Venice (except the Piazza of St. Mark's) which possessed a greater fascination for him than the Campo of Giovanni e Paolo. The sight of the stalwart figure of Colleoni in his coat of mail astride the splendid steed never failed to rouse in his young heart the fires of ambition.

"It's a great thing, Chico!" he exclaimed, peering through the cracks at the bright eyes — "a great thing to be so brave and do so much for Venice. Perhaps, who knows, you and I may do as much some day."

With that he loosed the prisoner who straightway flew into the air, and after gracefully circling for an instant around the statue, without further hesitation was off and was soon a mere speck in the blue sky.

Once the boy had the felicity of keeping Chico in his home all night. Then nothing would do but Luisa must admire his fine plumage, and his father must declare that he was quite the finest pigeon he had ever seen. It took the combined force of the family to consider what message they should send old Paolo in the morning, and, after a

great deal of discussion, Giovanni's stiff old hand penned the simple words on a bit of paper:

"Buon giorno!"

So the days passed; every few mornings Chico essayed some new flight until Paolo declared he was satisfied that the bird knew his way perfectly within a certain radius and must now venture farther from home. After this it was not so easy, and on several occasions Chico had adventures that tried even his stout little heart, and brought many an hour of anxiety to his friends.

CHAPTER VII

DANGER AHEAD!

THE earnest little fellow carrying his bird in a basket was now a familiar object in Venice and attracted much attention from tourists and by-standers who often collected in little groups to watch the graceful flights. To some it was the subject of jest, and to them it seemed nothing short of folly to spend so much time in the training of a pigeon, while others were loud in exclamations of delight.

"Bello! Bello colombo![1] He's a mighty fine bird, my boy!"

As for Chico, one could see that he greatly enjoyed his experience. He no longer showed resentment at being shut up in the basket, but evidently considered that a necessary prelude to his glorious flights.

One morning Andrea set out for the Arsenal, which is, as every one acquainted with the city

[1] Beautiful! Beautiful pigeon!

knows, one of the show places of Venice. In the olden days, when the Venetians were first in the art of shipbuilding, it was the working spring of their strength, their enemies looking upon the stronghold with envious eyes as symbolizing her supremacy over the Adriatic, and even now there was always a large number of strangers in its vicinity.

Andrea approached and took his station near one of the two great lions that guard the entrance. He was accosted by a well-dressed Austrian:

"What have you there, my boy? Anything to sell?"

"No, signore," was the quick reply. But Andrea, intent upon his mission, felt vaguely disturbed, liking neither the looks of the man nor the tone of his inquiry.

Silently and with evident envy the man watched the pigeon's joyous spiral; then he again addressed the boy:

"Come, now, what will you take for him? Twenty lire![1] A hundred? You must admit that

[1] A lire in ordinary times is worth about twenty cents.

is a high price for a pigeon when it would be so easy a matter to replace him. There are hundreds of pigeons in Venice."

"He is not for sale!" Andrea answered curtly, wishing the man would leave him alone.

The stranger turned sullenly, not liking to be baffled, muttering under his breath, "That bird would be worth any amount of money to me if I could but secure him for the War Department in Vienna!"

As for Chico his troubles for the day had only begun. By chance he flew somewhat lower than was usual with him, and thus attracted the attention of a shabby, ill-looking fellow who with gun in hand was wandering about the side streets, hoping he might be so fortunate as to get a shot at some fat pigeon for a pot-pie.

After a quick glance to be sure no sharpnosed guard was in sight, he raised his gun and fired. Startled by the report Chico quickened his flight, and the bullet whizzed past merely grazing one wing and inflicting a slight wound on his left leg. The pain, however, was sharp and caused

him to slow down, so that he did not reach his destination until some time after Andrea had returned, much to the anxiety of his friends.

When he finally fluttered, exhausted, into the nest, the old caretaker caught sight of the blood-stain, and exclaimed in alarm, "Chico, my bird, what has happened?" while Andrea, fairly beside himself, mourned as he stroked his wounded pet.

"It was the Austrian! I know it was! I liked not his words nor the expression of his eyes. And now Chico is going to die!"

"Nay, lad," Paolo answered, after carefully examining the leg. "It is only a flesh wound, and he will soon be himself again. As for the Austrian — I doubt very much if such was the case. I judge, from what you say, that he is quite too anxious to get possession of the bird to run any risk of harming him. More likely some greedy fellow shot him for a pie. I have known such things to happen in Venice."

"Shot for a pot-pie!" repeated Andrea, hot with indignation, while Maria whispered, "Poor

Chico! Poor Chico!" at the same time gently touching the bird's head, who responded with a mournful "coo."

For a few days the bird drooped and was quite an invalid: it was more than a week before he ventured beyond the friendly precincts of St. Mark's Square.

But he had learned a lesson which, later on, stood him in good stead, for ever after he took care to fly far above the reach of cruel gunners.

Several weeks after this incident, Paolo himself took the pigeon to Chioggia, some fifteen miles from Venice. However famous this little Italian town may be because of the battle that was fought there in the long ago, between the Venetians and the Genoese, it is now known chiefly as a fishing village and a picturesque spot where artists love to congregate.

On leaving the steamer the old man, not wishing to attract attention, avoided the broad street, with its arcades and cafés, instead picking his way along the canal, packed with fishing craft

of every description, until he came to a superb white bridge, the pride of the little town.

There he paused, and thinking himself quite away from inquisitive spectators, loosed the bird and stood a few moments watching him speeding his way above the beautiful white arch towards home.

How strong were the graceful wings, and how steady the flight!

It was a warm day in early spring; he threw himself on the bank of the canal grass thinking how pleasant it was on the water's edge. Suddenly a voice sounded in his ears causing him to start visibly:

"Surely, it must be a pleasant occupation to be a pigeon fancier."

The tone was ingratiating, but resenting the intrusion, Paolo looked around and caught an expression that belied the smooth words, and made him instinctively distrust the stranger who had accosted him.

He did not answer, and the man pursued: "No wonder, when you have so fine a bird. May I ask

for what particular purpose you are training him?"

"Only for a boy's pleasure," was the short reply. Paolo immediately surmised that this was he of whom Andrea had told him.

As he rose to go, the man went on, still more suavely: "By the way, I have a very special reason why I should like a carrier pigeon." He lowered his voice. "And am prepared to pay any amount for him; will you not set a price?"

Paolo emphatically shook his head. "He can't be bought! I tell you the bird is not for sale!" And with that the old caretaker walked away.

He was troubled, and the remainder of the time before the steamer sailed walked the narrow streets, too much disturbed over the incident to notice the women in the doorways making lace and the children sitting on the ground beside the narrow footpaths, their fingers busy knitting or stringing beads.

He did not know that the Austrian followed him, and that, on reaching the quay, the intruder chose a seat on the other side of the steamer.

It is no wonder that the artists go wild over the harbor, dotted as it is with picturesque sails of yellow, blue, or red. Just beyond is Palestrina, equally interesting, and known as the "narrowest town on earth," while a little farther on the steamer skirts along manifold vegetable gardens, in the midst of settlements whose simple homes are gay in their coloring of pink, yellow, red, or white.

By the time the Lido was reached, the sun was low in the heavens, and soon the lagoon was before them, bright in the roseate rays. After this it was not long before Venice came in sight, more lovely than ever in the first twilight.

With a sigh Paolo stretched his limbs, cramped by sitting so long in one position. He was getting old, he reflected, and found even a few hours' excursion tiring in the extreme. As he made his way towards the Piazza, he decided positively that not one syllable would he breathe to the children of his encounter with the Austrian.

"It would only worry them, and what's the use?" he reflected. "It's old Paolo who must

guard Chico" — and he shook his head — "I fear it will be a hard thing to do."

At a safe distance the stranger followed until St. Mark's Square was reached. There he concealed himself behind a column and watched to see the location of Chico's nest.

It was so late that the children had gone home, but Andrea had left a folded paper, weighted by a stone, on the window ledge. Opening it Paolo deciphered, without difficulty, the boy's writing.

"Chico reached home at ten minutes to four."

"Bene!" the old man ejaculated, forgetting his fatigue; "he made it in thirty minutes, and it took me all of three hours."

As he reached his rough hand in through the window and touched affectionately the sleeping bird, the Austrian moved from his position and slunk down a side street. He had found out all he wanted, and his malicious expression changed to one of triumph as he muttered:

"I'll have that bird yet, in spite of the old man!"

CHAPTER VIII

A TERRIBLE EXPERIENCE

EVER since Chico had become grown he had been in the habit of flying from his nest in the early morning for a brief survey of the Piazza. First, he would make his way to the famous well and, after a refreshing bath, would walk about on the ground for a while in search of stray morsels of food, perchance left by tourists the day before. Then, on the way back to his ledge, he would stop for a moment here and there among the statuary for a gossipy "coo" with one and another pigeon friend. But no matter how interested he became in the sights and news of the Square, he was always on his ledge in time to greet his dear human friends, upon whose appearance there would ensue such an excited fluttering of wings and such a delighted cooing that Maria would laugh aloud in glee, while Andrea emptied his pockets of choicest titbits.

One morning, a few weeks after the trip to

Chioggia, as Chico was making his customary early flight, his bright eyes caught sight of some enticing crumbs on the pavement close to the steps leading to the new Campanile. They seemed unusually good, and he lingered for some time pecking, first at one and then another.

Suddenly he was grasped by a strong hand and hastily thrust into a padded dark box.

Poor Chico! His heart fluttered so that he could n't think. Not but what he was used to being handled, and perhaps his prison was a new kind of basket, but even so he rebelled. There were no friendly cracks through which he could catch an occasional glint of light, but only a few airholes clustered at the top. Then, too, his quarters were so cramped that even the slightest flutter was well-nigh impossible; and, after a few struggles, utterly discouraged, and fearing the worst, he gave up and crouched down, entirely at a loss as to what had happened.

The Austrian, angered at having been thwarted in every attempt he had made to purchase the pigeon, had been watching the bird's habits ever

since he had followed the old caretaker, and had deliberately planned to capture him in this way. His prize now secured, he made his way straight for a gondola and gave orders to be rowed with the greatest possible speed to his lodgings, and, on arriving, carried to his room the innocent-appearing black box which resembled nothing so much as a folding kodak.

How satisfied he felt with himself, and how he gloated over the way in which he had outwitted the old man! For a moment he held the box to his ear, as if anxious to assure himself that the bird was still there. Not a sound came from the trembling inmate. Had anything happened? Cautiously unfastening the catch, he reached in his hand and touched the soft head. There was a slight quiver.

Catching hold of the trembling body, he lifted out the bird and feasted his eyes upon him. What a beauty he was! Not so large, to be sure, as some that flit about Venice, but so perfectly marked, and with so broad a breast, and such sweep of wings! He would profit richly by his

morning's work. If only he could get his prize safely out of Venice. There was no time to lose. He might be tracked by that old fool of a caretaker, and in that case he would have had his pains for nothing. And if by chance the matter should be brought to the attention of the authorities, he might be arrested and jailed; the Venetians make such a fuss over their precious pigeons.

A knock at the door made him start guiltily and thrust the pigeon roughly back into the box. After all, it was only a messenger with a telegram recalling him immediately to Vienna, which, he reflected, fitted nicely into his plans. He would start the next morning, he concluded, as he carefully concealed the black box under the bed, and took more than usual pains in locking the door when he went out for dinner and to complete his arrangements in regard to leaving.

Chico heard the door close and knew he was alone. What did it all mean? He had never before suffered such indignities! To be placed by loving friends in his dear familiar basket, while he was being taken to some point from which he

might make a glorious flight — he had long since become reconciled to that experience; but to be seized by a stranger's hands and ignominiously shoved into a black prison and hidden in a strange room — that was an insult his free spirit could not brook. For a while he felt too utterly despondent to make a movement, but after a little, very cautiously, he began again to feel carefully with his beak around the box in search of some crack. There was not one to be found. Next he tried with all his power to enlarge the tiny airholes. It was impossible, and he gave himself up to blackest despair.

When his captor returned he opened the box, took out the bird, at the same time placing some kernels of corn and a saucer of water before him. Chico had no appetite for food, but parched with thirst drank feverishly.

"Eat! can't you?" The man spoke roughly. What on earth was the matter with the pigeon to be so obstinate? "Hang it, if he won't eat," he exclaimed aloud, "he'll starve to death before I can get him to the War Department."

With that he fairly forced the spiritless head into the pile of kernels on the floor, but without avail; the bird, heart-broken, refused to open his beak. His tail feathers drooped more mournfully than ever, and his captor, thoroughly out of patience, angrily thrust him back into his prison. So the rest of the day and night passed.

The Austrian rose early the next morning and hastily throwing his belongings together was soon on his way to the station, suitcase in one hand and the black box in the other.

At the depot there was more than the usual delay in procuring his ticket. There was a crowd of men and women before him, and, impatiently enough, he was obliged to wait his turn. Worse than anything, he found it necessary to lay aside his possessions. He hesitated, then, after a quick survey of the room, selected a corner near enough for him to keep an eye on his precious box. It seemed an eternity before he could get anywhere near the ticket-office window, and he completely lost what little temper he had when a garrulous woman blocked his way and took fifteen minutes

of additional time in an interminable wrangle over change.

In the meantime an inquisitive youngster, left to his own devices by his mother who was also in line before the ticket-office window, was creeping about the floor in search of diversion. After being foiled in various directions, his sharp eyes caught sight of the suit-case and interesting-looking box. Without an instant's hesitation he scrambled thither. As it happened, the Austrian having at last attained his object, was at that very moment engaged in folding the long ticket, and his attention, therefore, was diverted from watching his property.

The child fumbled first with the suitcase. It was securely locked. Next he seized the black box with his grimy fingers. It was fastened only with a single strap. As this finally yielded, a look of rapture spread over his Italian features, and with renewed zeal he proceeded to pry open the cover.

Suddenly he gave a shriek, at the same time covering his face in terror as something sharp

brushed against his cheeks and flashed upwards.

It was Chico! He was free at last! For a moment, dazed by the sudden release, the bird battered his splendid head against the ceiling, then, before the roomful of travelers realized what had happened, he was out in the open, spreading his glorious wings toward home.

When the Austrian, on turning to gather up his possessions, realized what had occurred, he turned in rage toward the frightened child:

"You, you —" He choked in wrath, raising his arm as if to strike. But at that moment the mother threw herself against him, screaming:

"You touch my child! You touch —"

The crowd by this time was closing in upon them, so that even the station guard found it difficult to push his way through in his endeavor to find out the cause of the disturbance.

Suddenly the cry of "All aboard!" was heard, and instantly the excited gathering dispersed, the enraged woman grabbing her child and leading the procession.

Just behind came the Austrian, bearing his suit-

case and the empty black box. Fortunate it was for him that the summons had come when it did, for otherwise he might soon have found himself taken into custody on the charge of disturbing the peace, and on the way to a cell in the Venetian prison.

As it was, he sank into his seat in the little train muttering all sorts of imprecations upon the whole Italian people, and thanking his stars he would soon be out of the country.

While all this had been going on, great had been the consternation in St. Mark's Square over Chico's strange disappearance. When the children did not find him waiting, as usual, for them, they were sure he must have been shot, and Andrea mourned constantly, "E morte! E morte!"[1]

But Paolo had his theory, and the more he thought the matter over, the more he felt convinced that the bird was alive and in the possession of the Austrian. Dropping his work for the day, he spent the weary hours going up and down the narrow streets in vain effort to discover some

[1] He is dead.

trace of him. From time to time he called, "Chico! Chico!" But, alas, no Chico answered.

Then the night came. Still no news. The next morning Paolo resolved to go to the authorities, and was about to set out when suddenly there was a cry from Maria, who was sitting grieving on the lowest step of the church, watching the pigeons flying about in the blue sky.

"There's Chico!" she exclaimed, greatly excited, and pointing to a small speck, far above them. "It's he! I know it's he!"

"I'm afraid not," the old man answered, shaking his head; "we have been deceived too many times."

But Andrea was leaning forward, his whole form tense with emotion, and, in another moment with radiant face he flung his cap into the air, and leaped to his feet, shouting, joyfully:

"Urra! Urra! It's he! It's he!" and so it proved. No other bird could fly with such strong, sure strokes.

Soon he was in his nest drinking eagerly the water Andrea had placed for him. It was the

first thing he always wanted when he returned from a flight, but now he drank more thirstily than usual. Then, how he did eat! It was plain he was half starved. There was no mistake about it, he was thin, and his feathers were so bedraggled that it was evident he had not preened them since he had been gone.

But he was home, and nothing else mattered!

CHAPTER IX

"COO-OO, COO-OO-OO. RUK-AT-A-COO"

THERE was no denying the fact that Chico was a handsome bird, and as time passed, he became more and more careful of his appearance. He would spend fully half an hour each morning over his toilet, smoothing every feather into place with the most exact nicety, polishing his delicately arched bill, and proudly spreading his tail. Then, when the sun shone full upon him, the peculiar markings of his wings seemed fairly radiant in their glorious iridescence.

From the saucy tilt of his dainty head to his graceful feet, he was a Beau Brummel among pigeons.

It was no wonder that his little master's heart swelled with pride, and that he repeated, over and over again, "My Chico is grande; my Chico is — GREAT!"

But there came a time when it was evident

that, in spite of the gorgeous appearance he presented, he was not altogether happy.

While he polished his beak and preened his feathers more assiduously than ever, there was a note of pleading in his cooing that puzzled the children, and caused Andrea to remark: "I wonder what can be the matter with Chico!"

In reply Paolo nodded his wise old head and answered, with a touch of sympathy, "I know—he's lonely, and wants a mate." The old man even went so far as to select a dainty little lady pigeon and place her on the ledge, but alas! Chico resented what he evidently considered an intrusion, retreated to the extreme edge, where he looked askance at his companion, and refused to be moved by her modest advances. Not a single "coo" would he give, and to his everlasting disgrace finally gently but firmly pushed her off the ledge. It was plain she had no charms for him! After one or two further attempts, which ended in the same way, Paolo gave up and allowed Chico to manage his own courting.

When his gentle, beseeching cooing failed to

attract, he resorted to bolder methods, flying about the Square, and lingering longer than was his wont among neighboring nests, until he chanced upon a pigeon that took his fancy.

She was a modest little thing, soft drab in color, and not as strikingly marked as he, but she was popular with the birds about, and Chico had to fight one or two lusty rivals before he won her for himself.

The children watched it all with fascinated interest, and when one morning they found her by his side on the ledge outside his nest, they were fairly beside themselves with delight.

All day long they perched together, billing and cooing to their hearts' content, "the prettiest sight in Venice," as all agreed who saw them.

"Coo-oo," he would begin, and she would answer softly. Then they would join in "Coo-oo, coo-oo-oo. Ruk-at-a-coo, coo-oo."

Sometimes he would playfully ruffle her feathers, and she would respond by turning to him so coquettishly that they would touch their bills

together, and so the hours would pass as they billed and cooed in their love-making.

It was Maria who named the dainty little mate, calling her Pepita, from the first time she saw her by Chico's side. But it was Paolo who declared he could give a pretty good guess as to what they were saying to each other in their soft pigeon language.

"Well, what is it?" Andrea asked incredulously.

"She wants him to help her fix up the old nest," he asserted in a tone of confidence that greatly impressed his audience; "like the rest of the women-folks, she is n't satisfied with it as it is, and I don't know as I blame her — it 's a pretty poor excuse for a home, even if Chico did manage to make it do while he was a bachelor."

The children's faith in the old man increased tenfold when, the very next day, they discovered Pepita returning from a short flight with a few coarse straws in her beak, while in another moment Chico came flying around the corner of the church with half a dozen more.

"You were right!" Andrea exclaimed, as he made an effort to restrain his boisterous delight, and quietly looked in at the busy pair; "they are working as hard as ever they can this very minute."

After that there were more straws brought, besides other things evidently intended for lining, and though their home, when done, was not as smooth or fine a piece of workmanship as many other birds can boast of, at least it was comfortable, and exactly according to their ideas.

Chico had always loved his nest, but, with the appearance of two eggs under Pepita's breast, he found it difficult to leave, even on necessary flights. He was a devoted husband and was content to perch by her side the whole day long, softly cooing in his efforts to entertain her, and always ready to relieve her in keeping the eggs warm when she wished to take a turn around the Square for exercise or in search of food.

To the children the nest was a place of mystery, and the first thing in the morning they would together climb up to the old box and whisper:

"Buon giorno, Chico; buon giorno, Pepita; how are the eggs to-day?"

And then the mystery deepened! It was Paolo who whispered the wonderful news in their ears.

"How do you know the eggs have hatched?" Andrea queried somewhat doubtfully.

In reply the old man pointed to the pavement where some broken shells were a mute witness of the miracle that had occurred.

They were wild with ecstasy, and could scarcely wait to see the little fledglings, and the second morning after the old caretaker let them come into the shed and, by the light of a flickering candle, showed them the naked little bodies, just as he had shown them Chico, months before.

Pepita had, from the first, accepted the children as her friends (probably Chico had told her all about them in the early days of their courtship), but she could n't help showing her anxiety on this occasion, and flew distractedly back and forth, while Chico kept jealous watch perched on Andrea's shoulder.

He was a good father, never failing in loving

attention to his family, and bringing the choicest titbits to Pepita.

He hovered anxiously about while she fed the greedy fledglings with the soft pulpy mass she prepared so carefully, and was always ready to look after the "bambini," as Maria insisted on calling the baby birds.

Altogether, Chico was so taken up with his new cares that his training was badly interrupted, and Andrea, especially, became greatly worried lest he should forget all he had learned.

"He'll be all out of practice," he mourned, "and the next time we try him he'll forget and lose his way home."

But Paolo was reassuring. "Never you fear," he replied; "I have heard that the most important messages are entrusted to birds that have young in the nest. That is when the love of home is strongest."

And so it proved: when Chico was once more tried, he surprised them by the swiftness of his flight. In fact, in some instances he actually made more than thirty miles an hour.

The spring advanced: there were other eggs in the nest, and other broods to be cared for, and always Chico remained the faithful husband and father — tender to his fledgling offspring — loving and true to his little wife.

And, whenever household cares permitted, the two could be seen on the window ledge, billing and cooing:

"Coo-oo, coo-oo-oo. Ruk-at-a-coo."

CHAPTER X

A GALA DAY

At last the new Campanile was completed. When the historic old bell tower had fallen that morning in July, the people had been stunned and had given way to such grief as only Italians feel over the loss of a thing of beauty.

It had fallen at nine-thirty in the morning, and when the Town Council met that evening, it had been at once decided that immediate steps be taken to erect a new tower, "dov' era, com' era" (where it was and as it was). And in this all Italy concurred. The first stone had been laid on St. Mark's day, April 25, 1903.

Slowly the graceful tower had risen from the confused mass of débris at its base, no effort being spared to make it as strong and beautiful as possible to conceive. Three thousand piles had been used in the foundation, and almost every fragment of the old had been utilized in the effort to reproduce, as nearly as possible, the much-

loved structure. Carefully the shattered pieces of bas-reliefs had been fitted together by trained artisans, the figure of Venice on the east walls had been completely restored, while one favorite group of the Madonna and Child had been pieced from sixteen hundred fragments: the bells had been recast, and when this gala day dawned, the same gold angel surmounted the top of the new Campanile that had looked protectingly over the city for generations.

What wonder that Venice was beside herself with joy, and that great festivities had been arranged to celebrate the occasion—on St. Mark's day, 1912?

The city was filled with visitors; the little steamers and motor-boats chugged right merrily along the canals, laden with sight-seers, while the gondoliers reaped a rich harvest from the crowds of strangers.

Among those who came to attend the festivities was the children's uncle, Pietro Minetti. He was the elder brother of Giovanni, and was an important personage (at least in his own estima-

tion) for had he not left the little Venetian home years before and become a citizen of the world? Andrea and Maria were wild with delight when they heard he was coming, and speculated much as to their rich uncle, for, of course, he must be rich as every one was out in the great world.

And at first sight it seemed that he must be even richer than they had dreamed, so elegant did he appear in his checked trousers and starched shirt. His mustache was waxed, and he walked with a swagger as he jauntily swung a cane.

All at once the little home on the side canal seemed poorer and shabbier than ever, and Luisa could n't help wishing the smells of fish and garlic from the shop below were not quite so strong.

But though Pietro looked somewhat superciliously at the plain surroundings, after the strangeness wore off he proved to be a most entertaining guest, with his stories of the great cities which he had visited. He had been as far as London, and the children drew close in order that they might not lose a single syllable of his wonderful tales.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed, introducing the subject of the Campanile, "it really seems as if the town is waking up! I hear there is a lift in the tower, and the old angel on the top has been actually placed on a pivot, to act as a weather vane as well as a thing of beauty. That's more than could have been expected of slow Venetians. If it were only possible to get in a few automobiles there might be some hope for the city."

"Automobiles!" Giovanni was indignant, resenting even the mention of such newfangled contrivances. "Venice would n't be Venice with automobiles!"

"Well, motor-cycles, then!" laughed Pietro good naturedly; "anything that would give some noise and ginger to the old town. Pep is what Venice needs!" And he chuckled to himself at the thought of motor-cycles on St. Mark's Square.

Neither Giovanni nor Luisa had any patience with such talk, but the children edged nearer, and their eyes grew bigger as they asked him eager questions in regard to the marvelous things he had mentioned.

"Have you ever seen horses?" Andrea ventured timidly; "I mean real horses, not pretend ones like those on the top of St. Mark's?"

"Horses!" he repeated, bursting into so loud a laugh that Maria shrank away, half frightened; "horses! Why, they're so old-fashioned that no one cares for them any more. They're quite too slow for the twentieth century!"

Andrea's head swam — horses old-fashioned! What kind of a strange world was it outside of Venice? All at once his childish air castles came tumbling down. But before he could question further it was time for bed, and with his imagination roused to the utmost he tossed uneasily until he fell asleep to dream he was racing with the wind in a strange kind of car with the Devil himself as driver.

The exercises were to begin at ten o'clock the next morning, and the Piazza was fairly packed with people hours before that time. Thanks to Paolo our little group had a good place to view the proceedings in a certain musty alcove of St. Mark's, and there they sat cramped through

what seemed to Maria like interminable hours.

As for St. Mark's Square, even Pietro had only words of praise for its gala appearance: from the three flagstaffs opposite the church fluttered the colors of Italy. Everywhere was music, everywhere was gayety, and the crowds of people united in glad cries of "Viva Venezia!"[1]

For Venice, more than any other place in the world, belongs to rich and poor alike. And in the midst of it all, sympathizing with every mood, is St. Mark's Church, the pride of the Venetian people. Never did she seem more glorious than on this gala day, never did her gold mosaics sparkle more brilliantly in the sunshine than when the great high magistrate pronounced the solemn words: "Dov' era, com' era," and the bells rang to mark the completion of the exercises.

Then, hark! a whirr, whirr of wings, a sudden darkening of the sky that caused the joyful thousands to look into the heavens above them.

In an instant the shadow resolved itself into over twenty-five hundred pigeons that had been

[1] Long live Venice!

brought to Venice that they might carry the glad news to every part of Italy.

Then it was that the populace went wild with joy; thousands of handkerchiefs fluttered, the cries of "Viva Venezia!" swelled and rent the air, until they were drowned by the inspiring notes of the Italian national tune, played by patriotic musicians in the bandstand at Florian's.

Our little group shared in all the excitement, waving with the rest and joining in glad cries of "Urra! Urra!" Even Pietro was aroused to admiration, and as the music died away and the crowds began to disperse, he exclaimed: "There's no doubt but that Venice has outdone herself, and it was a master stroke to make such use of homing pigeons. These spoiled birds that flutter about the Square have no spirit in them, and I doubt if one of them could carry a message even from the Lido!"

"Chico could," asserted Andrea stoutly, touched to the quick by the sweeping declaration; "he could carry a message from 'most anywhere to Venice!"

"Who's Chico?" Pietro asked quickly, elbowing his way through the surging mass of people in the church.

"He's my pigeon!" Andrea answered, eager to defend his bird, and raising his voice in an effort to make himself heard above the confusion. "I've trained him, and I'll show you to-morrow! I don't suppose I could get to him in all this crowd."

"To-morrow will do as well," Pietro managed to ejaculate, as they found themselves at last in the Square, which was still solidly jammed with people. "I am somewhat of a pigeon-fancier myself, and if that bird of yours is what you say he is we'll see, we'll see!"

With this their conversation was interrupted and not again resumed, the remainder of the afternoon being spent in promenading the Square, going up in the lift of the Campanile, and managing to appease their appetites with the various pastes and fruits which Pietro generously stood treat for.

Almost before they were aware of it, the after-

noon was drawing to a close, and with the coming of twilight Venice became more of a fairy-land than ever.

Outlining the buildings throughout the Square, throwing into prominence every graceful point and cornice, were thousands of electric lights: St. Mark's herself appeared more like a jewel box than ever, and was only surpassed by the Campanile which was ablaze from top to bottom.

Everywhere was music, everywhere was light, and in this new and splendid setting, Venice looked a very gorgeous "Bride of the Sea!"

The spirit of the old Carnival days was once more present: as women in black shawls and strange masked figures threaded their way amid the throngs of people accompanied by wild music, while confetti, thrown from every balcony, caused shouts of laughter and fell harmlessly upon them.

There were to be fireworks on the water, and Paolo had offered his old gondola that they might join the gay crowds on the Grand Canal. Here Pietro was supreme, and it required only the

twisting of a scarf about his waist to transform him into a gondolier, at least in the eyes of his not too critical audience.

So Giovanni and the children crowded into the shabby gondola and rowed with thousands of others up and down, watching the rockets soaring into the sky and bursting into myriads of dazzling stars as they fell into the water below.

Later, when the display was over, Pietro guided them among the storied palaces of the long ago, now close behind some concert barge, playing softest strains of grand opera, or again answering the low call of passing gondoliers with like musical response.

CHAPTER XI

A LITTLE JOURNEY IN THE WORLD

THE morning after the great Carnival day Andrea woke with a sense of disquietude. Something was going to happen, but for a few moments he could not think what it was. Then with a rush he remembered. He had promised to show Chico to his uncle. Since the suggestion had been made he had not been able to dismiss it from his mind and, even while watching the bursting rockets the evening before, he had found himself wondering what Pietro could have meant by his mysterious remark, "If the bird is what you say — we shall see. We shall see!"

Although he liked his uncle immensely, he had not been able entirely to overcome a certain feeling of awe in his presence, and he shuddered at thought of many scathing criticisms he had heard him make upon objects which he had been brought up to regard with veneration. Suppose he should make fun of Chico! The quick tears started at

the thought. Then his eyes flashed and he sprang out of bed, exclaiming to himself, "I don't care what he may say, I know he's the finest pigeon in the world!"

This feeling of confidence lasted until they had finished breakfast and Pietro had pushed back his chair, with the remark:

"And now, my boy, we must be off to see that wonderful bird of yours!"

Then his timidity returned, and beset by anxious fears, he walked silently by his uncle's side.

Pietro was in his most jocund mood that morning, jauntily swinging his cane, joking about the Rialto as they crossed it, and talking a great deal about London and Paris. His companion's courage gradually oozed away. In fact it was completely gone by the time they rounded the corner of the church and came upon the happy couple basking in the sunlight and cooing affectionately to each other.

"So that's the fellow!" — and Pietro pointed to Chico, entirely ignoring little Pepita by his side.

Andrea nodded, not daring to trust himself to speak.

"Hum-mm." His uncle cleared his throat. "Suppose you call him that I may see him closer."

Andrea managed a faint "Chico," and in an instant the pigeon was in his lap, burrowing in his pocket in search of the usual titbits.

"Hum-mm." Pietro caught the bird firmly in one hand, at the same time swiftly running the other over the trembling body.

"Long wings, bulge prominent over the ear, broad breast, a clear, keen eye — "

Andrea's heart almost ceased to beat.

Then, very slowly, Pietro went on appraisingly. "Very good, very good, indeed! And you say he has had some training?"

"Oh, yes!" the boy answered, and with glowing face, vastly relieved, "he has carried messages from ever so far, from the Lido, from Chioggia — "

"Have you kept his record?" Pietro interrupted brusquely.

At this the boy fished in one pocket after another, finally producing a grimy card, covered with figures.

His uncle took it, and, after studying it over carefully, handed it back, saying:

"This is somewhat remarkable, and should be marked on his wings." With that he produced a tiny bottle of India ink and a rubber stamp, and while Andrea, with fascinated interest, held the bird, Pietro copied the figures on the primary feathers of the right wing, remarking as he finished, "There, I guess that will attract attention from any fancier. You have really a fine bird, my boy, and I would suggest that it might be well to exhibit him at some pigeon show. There's to be one at Verona next week."

Andrea's head swam. What was his uncle saying? Go to Verona? Exhibit Chico? Impossible! Well he knew there was no money in the little home to pay for any such expenditure, but Pietro was not yet through.

"Your father and mother have treated me right royally ever since I've been in Venice, and

I am sure they will not deny me this opportunity to make some return. It will not cost you a single lira. What say you, will you accompany me? I happen to be going in that direction and can arrange to stop over as well as not."

Andrea caught his uncle's hands in a paroxysm of joy. In his wildest dreams he had never thought of ever going anywhere outside of Venice, and now, to be thus calmly discussing an errand like this, it seemed as if he could scarcely believe his ears.

Then Pietro, taking for granted that the matter was settled as far as Andrea was concerned, that very evening broached the plan to the boy's father and mother, overruling all their objections with the result that the following Monday found the two travelers, with Chico in his basket, on the train bound for Verona.

It is an interesting trip for any one through the plain towns of northern Italy, and, needless to state, not the slightest detail of the passing landscape was lost on Andrea. Not once did he take his eyes from the car window save occasionally

to look through the cracks of the basket into Chico's bright eyes, as if to assure himself that the bird was still there.

On, on they sped, catching glimpses of gnarled olive trees, silvery gray, while Roman walls, centuries old, silhouetted against the horizon, spoke of a civilization long past. There were rounded hill-slopes and ancient castles, while the broad Adige dashed madly along the sides of the track.

It was two o'clock when they reached their destination and rumbled into the huge covered station of Verona.

With beating heart, Andrea followed the business-like Pietro as he led the way out of the station and hailed a vettura[1] to take them up the wide tree-shaded avenue.

The boy paid little attention to the marble palaces by which they drove, but was overwhelmed at the experience of actually being behind a horse. He drew a deep breath — it was a dream come true; and he was further amazed at

[1] Carriage.

finding their conveyance but one of an endless throng of wagons, carriages, and tram-cars.

In many ways Verona is fully as old-fashioned as Venice, but to Andrea the city seemed the personification of all that was progressive, and while the horses were not the gay steeds of the boy's dream, they were really alive, and wonder of wonders, as they drove over the grand arches of the historic structure which bridges the muddy, swirling waters of the Adige, they were suddenly outdistanced by what Pietro pointed out as one of the few automobiles of Verona.

The boy's eyes widened. What tales he would have to tell old Paolo and the little Maria! When they came to the great Arena, in the heart of the city, Pietro dismissed their vettura, and together they walked down the principal promenade to the shopping center where they mingled with the endless crowds of pedestrians and looked into the windows of the gay little shops that made Andrea think of Venice.

Not far from the imposing City Hall was an ancient red marble Gothic cross about which

were clustered hundreds of what looked like canvas toadstools, but which were, in reality, immense white umbrellas, sheltering countless market stalls. Here were gathered a motley collection of all sorts of things for sale, ranging from boots and shoes to many kinds of provisions and fruits.

Through all this Pietro walked so fast that his companion had hard work to keep up with him, and was glad when they finally stopped in front of an enclosure sheltered by two large umbrellas. Then his heart sank and he clutched his basket closer as he realized that here was where the pigeon show would be held, and understood, from what a loud-voiced man was calling, that the birds were already being entered. He wished — oh, how he wished — he had not come, and was almost overwhelmed by the thought that he would be obliged to leave Chico with these chattering strangers.

There was no alternative — already many of the birds were in place. He could see some of them and realized that they were, for the most

part, dejected looking specimens. He touched Pietro's sleeve nervously and inquired faintly, "Are you sure I shall get him back?"

But on this point his uncle was most reassuring and replied confidently:

"There's nothing at all to worry about. The bird will be perfectly safe. They'll fasten an aluminum tag about his leg with his number on it and give you the duplicate. A claim check, you know. Come, buck up and be a sport!"

Still doubtful, Andrea sorrowfully relinquished his pet. From that time on, his peace of mind was gone, and he mournfully studied the bit of aluminum with the number — 1104.

CHAPTER XII

THE BLUE ROSETTE

PIETRO noticed the lad's dejection and exerted himself to the utmost to divert him. After a good dinner he proceeded to show him the sights of Verona, at the same time telling him interesting tales about the Arena, the beautiful gardens, and the palaces of olden time. But Andrea remained listless, only rousing when his uncle proposed a visit to the tomb of Romeo and Juliet which was the one place his mother had charged him to see.

The show was to open the next morning at ten o'clock, and long before that time there was an eager crowd at the turnstile.

All was in order — the birds of the various exhibits being arranged in cages in different compartments. There were dozens of every color and variety, from big fellows, brought 'way from London, to all white beauties. One corner was devoted to the homing pigeons, and here Andrea

discovered Chico in the same cage with some highly trained racers from Belgium. His head had lost its saucy tilt, and he was miserably pecking in the sawdust as if in search of something to eat. But otherwise he seemed in good condition, and his master felt a glow of pride as he mentally contrasted the appearance of "1104" with those exhibited by the foreign fanciers, although, of course, he supposed that, in all probability, Chico did n't have a ghost of a chance.

All this time his uncle was excitedly bobbing back and forth, mingling with the people and commenting on the points of one or another specimen. It was a good-natured crowd, that had, for the most part, drifted in from the poultry show that was being held in an adjoining tent. There was not much enthusiasm until four judges made their appearance, and with notebooks in hand, began their inspection of the cages. Then there was a stir; the bystanders pressed more closely to the railing, and there was considerable excitement as fluttering blue and white ribbons indicated the winners of first and second honors.

By the time the cage of messenger pigeons was reached, there was a ripple of genuine excitement, and from one and another quarter bids were shouted by those who knew the characteristics of a good homer. These began as low as "Four lire" on a pigeon from Milan, "A hundred lire" on number "670," an aggressive-looking Belgian, and then — Andrea's head swam as a burly American called out, "Fifty dollars on '1104.'"

After that things became lively as the judges passed from one to another, inspecting every bird most carefully and making note of individual characteristics. When they seemed especially pleased, or stopped to confer, as occasionally happened, over the record which, in every case, was marked on the wings, then the bidding became fairly furious, "670" leading and "1104" a close second. One of the judges took so long in his examination of Chico that a fat German changed his bid, and an American called out, "Come, get a move on you!" There was a long conference among the judges, during which the

people waited impatiently enough, and Andrea felt himself more tense every moment.

Finally, with exasperating deliberateness, one of them turned and announced that the blue rosette was awarded to number "1104." Andrea's cheeks went scarlet, and the air was rent by cries of "Urra! Urra!" "Bully for 1104!"

The boy's head swam. CHICO HAD WON. It seemed as if he could scarcely believe his senses. He looked around for his uncle only to find he had leaped the railing and was shaking hands with the judges, and pointing to Andrea as the owner of the bird. On every side could be heard excited comments, and the American, just behind, was holding forth at a great rate:

"I knew it — I knew it all the time; he doesn't make the show some of 'em do, but look at his breast! Look at the length of his wings, and his eye! There is n't a bird here with such a keen eye as he has! Then, did you watch him? He was n't half as scared as the other birds! Just kind of bored by the performance! One can see he has a strong heart, and that's what counts in

a homer! Why, bless me, I'd like to get hold of that bird. Is the owner anywhere around?"

It was then Pietro reappeared, jubilant, of course. He wrung the boy's hand until it ached, at the same time exclaiming, "You're wanted on every side; you can take your pick of chances to sell your bird, and if you ever wish to engage as a trainer of pigeons, the way is open to you!"

When Andrea presented his metal tag for "1104," the crowd fairly closed in upon him, shouting offers. Altogether it was a great triumph, but he felt tired, and his head ached so that it was a distinct relief when Pietro, looking at his watch, declared there was n't a moment to lose if he intended to catch the noon train for Venice!

He was glad it was over, and all the way down the tree-lined avenue, he kept looking through the cracks of the basket, as if to assure himself that Chico was really there.

But at the station another ordeal confronted him. Pietro had insisted when they were first discussing coming to Verona that Chico must fly

home, and to this Andrea, at the time, had consented. Now he wished he had not. He felt it almost an impossibility again to relinquish his bird, and pleaded with Pietro to release him from his promise. But, no, his uncle was obdurate, and was moved by no entreaties.

"Of what are you afraid? A bird which has the blue rosette can find his way from Verona. He must carry the news of his victory himself, and I miss my guess, if he does n't reach home before you do."

"But it looks most terribly like a storm," the boy expostulated, his eyes resting uneasily on the angry clouds looming over the castled hills.

"And what if it does rain? A homing pigeon has a stout heart and I warrant it will take more than a thunder-storm to dismay our prize bird." And with that he fastened to Chico's leg a little aluminum pouch, in which was a bit of paper containing the laconic message, "WON — THE BLUE ROSETTE!"

Andrea made no further protest, and away flew the bird, circling into the air above, then, by

still wider circles, higher and higher until he was finally off.

Andrea watched until the mere speck in the distance had completely disappeared. Venice seemed very far away! With a sinking heart he made his way across the platform and climbed into the little train from the window of which he forlornly waved "good-bye" to the irrepressible Pietro, who, after shouting a final injunction to the lad to "buck-up," and to be sure and let him know how long Chico took to make the trip by his "air-line," jauntily waved his hand, and the train moved out.

For fully half an hour Andrea crouched in his seat, altogether dejected, watching the sky illuminated from time to time by flashes of lightning. A man in the seat across the aisle leaned over to inquire the meaning of the blue rosette he wore on his breast, but Andrea shook his head and with blurred eyes looked out at the storm already breaking. Soon the thunder could be heard above the noise of the train, and hailstones as large as marbles rattled against the windows.

Somewhere in all that darkness Chico was flying! The boy's heart grew more and more heavy and was filled with bitterness against his uncle who had been so insistent. Of what use were empty honors if his bird was lost forever?

In the meantime Chico was having his difficulties. For the first time he was too far from Venice to catch even a glimpse of her domes or the new Campanile. He was puzzled.

But somewhere was Venice, *somewhere* his nest — with Pepita and the fledglings. The thunder rumbled, the lightning flashed, the rain fell. Yet his heart was stout and his courage strong.

Do they call it instinct that so unerringly guides the flight of the homing pigeon? Was it the sea that called? Did the winds convey a message? I know not, but, after that single moment of hesitation, the brave bird plunged into the darkness and made his way to home and loved ones.

At last the long afternoon was over and the slow Italian train pulled into Venice. Andrea sadly picked up his empty basket. As it hap-

pened, at the very moment he stepped upon the platform, the clouds parted and the sun shone, lighting with splendor the rippling waters of the Adriatic, and shining full on the golden domes of the churches.

He expected Paolo and his sister would be at the station to welcome him and to hear the result of the pigeon show. After all, what had it all amounted to if the bird had been lost in the storm? At that point in his reflections a little figure came rushing to him, all breathless with excitement. It was Maria, with her father and mother just behind. They were followed by the old caretaker, hurrying as fast as his rheumaticky limbs would permit, and, wonder of wonders! Andrea had to look twice to be sure he was not mistaken, perched upon his shoulder was — CHICO! To be sure, his feathers were a little disheveled, for he had been too busy with Pepita and the fledglings to take time to preen them, but apparently he was unharmed by the perils through which he had passed, and there was as saucy a tilt to his head as ever.

"Urra! Urra!" the boy cried, throwing his cap twice into the air, while his father wrung his hand excitedly, and Maria exclaimed:

"He came into the nest more than an hour and a half ago. Oh, is n't he the grande bird?"

"He's the fast express all right!" put in Paolo, waving his cane proudly in the air; "made the whole distance at the rate of over forty miles an hour."

Then they all talked at once, asking questions, first about the pigeon show, and then about the adventures in Verona.

It seemed as if Andrea could n't answer fast enough, there was so much to tell, and he repeated more than once as he passed the blue rosette for their closer inspection:

"There was n't a bird to compare with him!"

"And you say you rode behind a horse?" Paolo questioned, as the entire party crowded into the old gondola, and Chico flew into his master's lap.

"Si! Si! And saw an automobile!" was the proud answer as Andrea went on to describe

how it "went like the wind," just like the one he had dreamed of.

Unconsciously there crept into his demeanor a slight suggestion of Pietro's swagger, and while he was glad to get home, and though St. Mark's Square never seemed so beautiful before, still there was no denying it was a great experience to have traveled and seen something of the world.

CHAPTER XIII

AND ALL FOR ITALY!

SOME years passed and Andrea was now a stocky lad with resolute walk and steady black eyes. He was fourteen, the age to which he had long looked forward as the time when he should realize his ambition to work beside his father in the glass factory. Maria, too, was growing up: already her fingers were almost as deft as her mother's in making lace, under whose guidance she could even fashion the beautiful roses, the special characteristic of Venetian point.

As for Chico, he was constantly establishing new records, and his wings bore witness to many triumphs.

Then the Great War came, and the world shook with its thunders. On May 23, 1915, Italy had declared hostilities against Austria-Hungary, although the Italian offensive did not begin until 1917.

At first the victories were all on the side of

Italy, and when her brave heroes broke through on the Isonzo front, it seemed almost as if they were destined to sweep everything before them. Then the tide turned: one town after another was retaken by the Austrians, until, on October 29, 1917, the entire Italian front on the Isonzo collapsed.

Then came days of black despair: all Italy mourned, but in Venice especially was the horror felt. From her situation she had always been a bulwark against the Austrians, and not yet had she forgotten the hated rule of her enemies.

Nearer drew the lines until the roar of the cannon could be sometimes heard, and there was scarcely a clear night that aeroplanes did not hover over the terrified city. Dimmed were the lights that were wont to make a fairyland of St. Mark's Square, and in the daytime the red, white, and green of the Italian flag supplied almost the only color, while the only music was the martial call of Garibaldi, to which countless feet marched to the field of battle.

"To arms!
Haste! Haste! ye martial youth!
On every wind our banners fly,
Rise all with arms, all with fire!"

The glass factories were closed, and Giovanni went, with the rest of the brave men, to fight for home and country. Even Pietro hastened from his wanderings to offer his services. The lace factories were deserted, and instead of the delicate threads and the bobbins, the women busied themselves with bandages for the Red Cross.

No longer did the canals echo the laughter of gay tourists, and desolately the pigeons flew about St. Mark's Square, which was almost a deserted place save for the workmen to whom had been assigned the task of protecting the church by placing sandbags on the roofs and iron girders at the windows: mournfully lapped the waters of the Adriatic.

The bronze horses were transferred to Rome for safety; even the pictures by the great masters were taken from their places and hidden, lest they fall into the hands of the enemy.

Old Paolo, who, for a year past had been de-

crepit, died, broken-hearted, when the first news came of Austrian victories. He was sadly missed in his accustomed haunts. A younger man succeeded him as caretaker of St. Mark's, and Andrea, not old enough to be drafted for service at the front, was appointed chief guard of the church by night.

Sacrifice was the watchword of the hour. Men gave up the savings of years, women brought their trinkets to be sold or melted down for the use of the Government.

And Andrea — what had he to give?

One night, as he paced back and forth on his beat, listening for the possible roar of an aeroplane or the sudden bursting of a bomb, there flashed into his mind the story of services rendered Venice in the olden time by homing pigeons. He seemed a child again, sitting close to old Paolo's side and listening to his tales of happenings in the long ago.

True, now there was wireless at the front, besides telephones and telegraphs, and yet, even with all these modern inventions, he wondered

if the War Department might not be able to find some use for a trusty pigeon.

Though the boy's heart grew faint at the thought of the sacrifice, his resolution was immediately taken, and as soon as he was released from duty in the morning he made his way directly round the church to the bird's nest. He was tall now and had no need of the box Paolo had placed so long ago for use as a step: thrusting his hand through the aperture, he firmly grasped Chico who happened at that time to be taking his turn with the eggs while his mate enjoyed a much-needed constitutional.

Naturally he resented the interruption and made futile efforts to free himself. But Andrea was resolved on no delay, and without more ado bore off the struggling bird, just as Pepita fluttered into the aperture, with an apology for being late, and ready to assume her wifely duties.

"Chico! Chico!" the boy exclaimed, gently smoothing the rumpled feathers, "you must n't mind, old fellow. I'm sorry to take you away,

but you and I have a duty to our country and we must n't shirk!"

Gradually the pigeon ceased to struggle, and while not in the least understanding what it was all about, snuggled close to Andrea's breast, putting his head confidingly inside his soldier's coat.

"And, Chico," the boy went on, "you must do your part, no matter what happens. And, if you" — he choked a little at the thought — "and if you should never come back, it will be for Venice, and for Italy. We won't forget that, will we, my bird?"

As he spoke, he bent his head to listen and caught a faint answering "coo," as Chico snuggled his head closer.

By this time he had reached the War Office which was located in one of the buildings on the north side of the Square. In response to his knock he was ushered into the presence of a kindly official who sat at a table littered with maps and papers of every description.

There was a moment's pause, during which Andrea stood uneasily fidgeting, and his courage

almost oozed away as he nervously twisted his cap.

But at last the great man looked up, and somewhat abstractly asked, "Well, my boy, what can I do for you?"

"Please, signore," Andrea faltered, as he took from his coat the precious bird, "please, I have a homing pigeon —"

At once the officer became alert. "A homing pigeon?" he repeated quickly. "Is he trained to carry messages?"

"Si, signore." And the boy forgot his embarrassment in his anxiety to tell of Chico's exploits. "He won the blue rosette at a pigeon show at Verona, a few years since, and see, here is the record of his flights." With that he spread out the wings and the officer studied them over thoughtfully.

When at last he spoke, Andrea could not but note the light in the tense eyes and the eagerness of his tone:

"My boy, this well-trained homing pigeon will, indeed, be valuable to the War Department.

Tell me, what shall I give you for your bird? Name your price!"

"My Chico is not for sale!" the boy protested stoutly. "It is my wish to give his services to my country!"

"Think carefully, the Department is ready to pay well for this branch of air-line service."

But Andrea shook his head. "No, signore, it is for Italy. There is but one thing I would make sure of." He paused.

"And what is that?" the great official inquired kindly. He was beginning to realize that this was no ordinary relation which existed between the lad and his pigeon.

"Please, I would ask that when the war is ended, I may have my bird again; that is, that is — " and the boy's eyes were misty as he spoke.

"To be sure, to be sure," the officer cleared his throat. "I'll see that you have a written voucher to that effect."

He touched a bell and gave the order in a business-like tone to the respectful soldier who at once made his appearance.

"We have a valuable addition to our air messengers in the shape of this well-trained homing pigeon. Have you room for him in the next consignment that is sent to the front?"

"Si, signore, one will go to-morrow. The baskets have four compartments and there is one place still vacant." With that he fixed the metal anklet, and Chico was thereby enrolled as number 7788 in the air brigade of the Italian army.

But that was not all; a voucher was then and there made out that, after hostilities had ceased, number 7788 should be returned to the owner, Andrea Minetti.

The great official affixed his own signature and, after handing the paper to the lad, escorted him to the door and opened it for him.

Though Andrea's heart was well-nigh bursting with grief, the parting words brought a thrill to his whole being:

"It is such sacrifices that will win the war for Italy and, believe me, this act of yours will not be forgotten!"

CHAPTER XIV

EVVIVA VENEZIA! EVVIVA ITALIA![1]

STILL nearer drew the hated Austrians: the roar of cannon could be heard distinctly now, an air raid was no longer a novelty, and many a home and public building showed ravages wrought by bursting bombs.

The hospitals were crowded with maimed, among whom was Pietro who had been gassed and wounded at the front, and was now slowly convalescing in Venice.

The Piazza echoed the tread of marching feet, by day and by night, and the battle hymn was heard on every side:

"To arms!
Haste! Haste! ye martial youth!
On every wind our banners fly,
Rise all with arms, all with fire!"

The world thrilled with tales of bravery, the exploits of Italian soldiers and aviators were

[1] Long live Venice! Long live Italy!

quoted far and wide. But with all their heroism they could not stay the Austrian advance.

With the coming of 1918 deepest gloom settled over Italy as the people girded themselves for what seemed a struggle for very existence: not the slightest suggestion of luxury was permitted, even the making and selling of cakes, pastry, and confectionery being sternly prohibited by government edict.

The Minetti family had fared as had the others, neither better nor worse, and though one corner of the wall of the modest home had been torn away in an explosion, the statue of the Virgin remained as if to protect from further harm. No news had come from Giovanni since his return to the front, over six months before, and Luisa, dry-eyed but worn and racked with anxiety, worked far into the night on bandages for the wounded. Maria, in common with others of her age, had lost the fresh prettiness that, by right, belongs to youth, and her form was bent by work and her face furrowed by lines of apprehension.

Of Chico nothing had been heard since the

morning, months before, when his master had left him in the office of the War Department. One's heart ached for the faithful little mate, as she brooded forlornly on the window ledge, refusing to pay the slightest heed to any bold fellow who dared make overtures to her.

His bird was much in Andrea's thoughts as he paced back and forth each night upon his beat and, gazing into the sky in his lookout for aeroplanes, he would strain his eyes for a speck that might resolve itself into Chico's wings.

Possibly, he reasoned, the bird had not yet been made use of. Perhaps — and at the thought, his heart would almost fail him — perhaps, it might even be that he had been entrusted with some message, but had failed to reach his destination.

To the boy's other duties had been added that of watching the nest. He had scorned the suggestion that an electric bell be placed there to attract attention.

"As if I should not hear the slightest flutter of my Chico's wings!" he protested. But, to make

sure, he even slept in the little room back of the church and arranged that hither should his meals be brought.

Poor lad! He, too, showed the strain of the Great War, and looked tense and worn. He was not the same Andrea who had dreamed of inventing some wonderful new glaze: now his ambition was to be an aviator in the service of the Government and, like the bird he loved, fly through the blue heavens.

One evening (it happened to be a cloudless one, with the moon scheduled to rise about one o'clock) he felt more than usually restless and on fire with this desire.

It was on such nights as this that the danger from air raids was especially imminent, and the boy's senses were at tight tension.

As the moon rose, Venice stood revealed an enchanted city, a place of beauty, touched as of old with a magic wand. Hark — already the clock was striking the hour of two! Andrea's eyes wandered from one familiar object to another: the Ducal Palace, the new Campanile, the col-

umn of St. Theodore, and, beyond, the dome of Sta. Maria della Salute. He held his breath, it was so wonderful. And to think — to-night, to-morrow, all might be in ruins. Surely the great God would never permit it!

Only a short time before, on June 15, the enemy had launched a new offensive along the Piave River, from the Asiago Plateau to the Adriatic Sea, and though a few days later the news had reached Venice that their own brave men had taken the offensive, nothing had since been heard. Would it be as it had been before, a few spasmodic successes and then — loss and defeat?

Suddenly (was he dreaming?) there was a whirr of wings; he rubbed his sleeve across his eyes. Swiftly there shot across his vision something that in the soft moonbeams seemed an arrow of silver — a flash of light! He was dazed; could it be — Chico? At full speed he ran to the nest, and there, close by the side of cooing Pepita, lay the exhausted bird, while a ray of moonlight disclosed a stain of blood across his breast.

Quick as a flash the boy reached in his hand,

unfastened the little aluminum pouch, and, without waiting to find out whether the pigeon was alive or dead, fairly flew to the War Department where a light was burning, as he knew it would be. In these days of strain the high official scarcely closed his eyes and on this night he was tracing over and over again the plan of the new offensive.

Andrea rapped on the window — he could not wait to knock and be admitted, neither did he dare to leave his watch for even a fraction of a second.

"Who is it?" — the window was cautiously opened.

"It is I, Andrea Minetti, number 7788 has just come in with a message from the front." With that he thrust the metal cylinder into the officer's hand. He tore it open and for one tense moment scanned the bit of tissue paper, then, with tears of joy, he read aloud: "'Austrian offensive declared a failure — Italians make sweeping victories along the Piave: Evviva Venezia! Evviva Italia!'" Then added exultantly, "Buone notizie! good news, good news!" and the

tears coursed freely down his furrowed cheek. Andrea, beside himself with joy, threw his cap into the air, echoing, "Viva Venezia! Evviva Italia! It was my Chico brought the message!"

At mention of the pigeon the officer turned quickly, asking:

"Your bird — tell me, is he alive and in good condition?"

"I know not, signore, there was a stain of blood upon his breast, but I stopped not to find the cause."

"Then go, go quickly. I will have some one relieve you of your watch the rest of the night. See that everything is done. Venice wakes from her nightmare, and the faithful messenger that brought the joyful tidings must not be neglected!"

Andrea saluted and started away, but had gone only a few steps when the officer recalled him:

"Hold — you say there was a stain of blood! The Red Cross surgeon is not too great a personage to save the bird. If you will take him to

the hospital, I myself will telephone the story!"

With a look of gratitude in his dark eyes, and a "Grazie, signore," Andrea was off as quickly as he had come, and fifteen minutes later was in the Red Cross rooms holding out the suffering Chico to the great surgeon, who, in less time than it takes to say it, had located the trouble, extracted the tiny bit of lead that had come so perilously near piercing the brave heart, bound up the wound, and handed the quivering bird back to his master:

"There, I have done my best. A short time and he will be all right, although his left wing will be crippled and his flights from now on can only be short." As he spoke, he laid his hand on Andrea's shoulder: "My boy, there is no greater hero in the wards of this hospital than this faithful homing pigeon!"

Tears blurred Andrea's sight as he hugged Chico close and with reiterated expressions of gratitude made his way down the hospital steps. The heart within his soldier's coat was pulsating with joy at the spontaneous words of praise and

the assurance that Chico would not die. Anything else mattered little.

Gently he laid the wounded pigeon in his nest, just as Maria came with his breakfast.

She was dazed, and at first did not understand what had happened; then a light broke over her face and, reaching up, she smoothed the ruffled feathers and whispered, "Poor Chico! Poor Chico!" until a quiver of the eyelids and the most pathetic of faint "coos" gave evidence that the sufferer appreciated her sympathy.

In the meantime the word had spread, and cries of "Evviva Venezia! Evviva Italia!" rent the air. People, mad with joy, marched up and down the narrow streets unfurling flags and shouting:

"Buone notizie! Buone notizie! Good news! Good news!"

The piazza became an animated place as groups of men, women, and children gathered, embracing one another, and longing to hear further details.

In the hospitals there was great excitement: it

was difficult to restrain the joyful demonstrations. When Luisa whispered the news in Pietro's ear, he leaped out of bed in spite of his wounds, crying:

"The grande bird! I always said he would be game! Oh, but he's a sport!"

As for Chico, if he could have spoken he would have told a harrowing tale. Thrown into the air with dozens of others, when all other means of communication were interrupted, at first even *his* stout heart was appalled. One by one the others fluttered to the ground, afraid to attempt the flight, and of the four who persisted, three fell, torn to pieces by bullets. But Chico struggled on, on, in spite of shot and shell — on, on, in spite of the fact that he was wounded, and the loss of blood made him weak, while the crippled wing retarded the swiftness of his flight. Still he carried on — his stout heart never wavering, until, in the distance, his keen eyes detected the tall shape of the new Campanile. Then, on and on, in spite of the great aeroplanes constantly threatening destruction.

At last the domes of the churches came in sight, and the salt smell of the Adriatic acted as a tonic to the weary bird. He was nearing home and Venice. Another moment and he was safe — safe with Pepita excitedly fluttering over him.

In the rejoicing Chico was called for again and again, but for the first time since Paolo had clumsily put together the rude nest for the forlorn little pigeon he had found upon the pavement, the window was closed that the sufferer might not be disturbed.

CHAPTER XV

THE HERO OF THE SQUARE

It was some months before hostilities ended, but favorable word continued to come from the front, and the gloom that had so long overhung Italy was dissipated. Women worked with light hearts, men fought with the assurance of victory.

Chico was soon about again and was the hero of the Square. Although his flights were now somewhat restricted, he found it very pleasant to fly about the accustomed haunts, and if he was a little inclined to assume the airs of a war veteran, no one criticized.

When Pepita, amid the cares of domesticity, wearied a little of her husband's oft-repeated tales of life at the front, he had only to repair to the Piazza where, in the perches among the Statuary, he never failed to find plenty of cronies eager to pay him fascinated attention.

When the armistice was signed, Venice gave herself up to revelry, and the scenes when the

Piazza was once more illuminated were wilder than at any Carnival time.

Processions of people, mad with joy, marched up and down, headed by Chico and his master, and shouting in praise of the brave bird.

It was not long before the city began to assume her customary appearance as greatly prized treasures were brought from their hiding-places.

The Colleoni statue once more stood in place: Titian's famous Assumption of the Virgin that had been transferred to Pisa was returned securely packed in a huge chest, some seven and a half meters in length, and amid the wild excitement the bronze horses were restored to their position on the top of St. Mark's. People thronged to witness the ceremony and afterwards flocked into the church where the patricians of Venice intoned the Te Deum in thanksgiving.

When the time came for conferring honors upon the war heroes, Chico was not forgotten. After some discussion as to whether it would be practicable for the bird to wear a band of honor about his leg, the idea was abandoned, and a

special medal was struck off and given to Andrea. It bore the arms of Italy on one side and a pigeon on the other, with the inscription, "De virtute." [1]

On the eventful day in the office of the War Department, after the presentation had been made, the General further addressed the boy who stood, all trembling at the honor that had come to his Chico.

"Special orders, my lad, have come from Rome that something shall be done for you."

As he paused, Andrea protested, "No, No! it is enough — the medal is enough!"

"The orders on this point are most explicit." The General's tone was positive. "Come tell us, what is your ambition?"

"To be an aviator, signore, in the service of my country," was the stammering answer.

"Bene! It shall be done. Your expenses shall be paid to the best government school of aviation, and, from this time on, an income of one hundred and fifty lire a month shall be allowed

[1] For courage.

your parents, for it is understood your father has aged greatly in the service of his country."

Andrea bowed his head. He had no words to express his gratitude. But, once outside, he ran every step of the way home, in his eagerness to tell the wonderful news.

The Great War is now a matter of history, and once more tourists are flocking to Venice. Again gay laughter is heard on the Grand Canal. The little shops that line the sides of the Piazza of St. Mark's are now bright with glittering strands of beads, while the women are once more busy with their bobbins.

The clock tower, the Ducal Palace, the Campanile — they are all there, beautiful as ever, and now as ever stands St. Mark's Church, sharing the joy of her people as she has sympathized with them in their sorrow.

Perchance, reader, you may yourself sometime visit this city of "Beautiful Nonsense," and, if so, may call "Chico, Chico!" and look to see if one of the fluttering pigeons that so contentedly coo

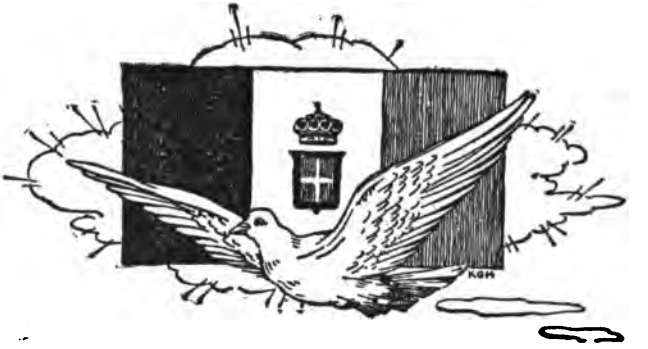
about the Square will not come and light upon your shoulder.

Should you be so fortunate as to catch a glimpse of an aeroplane circling in the blue sky, you may risk a guess that the aviator is Andrea, in the government employ.

You may even learn that he wears a medal ever about his neck and that sometimes he carries with him Chico as a mascot: sometimes, but not always, for little Pepita is sadly lonesome when her faithful mate is long away.

Who knows but that in the future this story of a homing pigeon may have a place with the other memories of this wonderful city, and that, five or six hundred years from now, children may gather about some old caretaker of St. Mark's and listen, with fascinated attention, as he tells of the service rendered Venice by a homing pigeon in the time of the Great War?

THE END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